HOLISTIC LIVING FOR THE MODERN BLOGGER:
IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN GREEN DOMESTIC BLOGS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses qualitative critical methods to examine a set of blogs written by eco-conscious mothers about their domestic experiences. Using political economic and feminist theoretical frameworks, 23 sites were analyzed to identify recurring discourses throughout the blogs, especially pertaining to anxieties around environmental crisis and the experience of womanhood/motherhood in neoliberal culture. The study found that motivations for blogging were largely based on concern for the physical and emotional health of oneself and one’s family, with a particular focus on the wellbeing of the authors’ children. Textual analysis revealed two major frames: wellness as a journey and obligatory empowerment. The first is found in messages that frame the pursuit of “true” (i.e., environmentally friendly or green) health, which is largely achieved through ongoing efforts of self-improvement, “detoxification,” and targeted patterns of consumption. Such messages reinforce the neoliberal commitment to responsibilization, in which the responsibility for addressing complex problems like environmental degradation is placed onto citizens and therefore shifted into the private domestic sphere. The second frame encompasses messages that pertain to the active adoption of postfeminist domesticity as unequivocally empowering, which were ultimately recognized as having a legitimizing effect on the individualist discourse that underpins neoliberalism. Suggestions for future research involve analysis of comments and other forms of audience interaction along with interviews with the authors; it is anticipated that these additional areas of study could provide useful insight into the way that readers interact with blogs and how bloggers conceptualize that interaction.
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CHAPTER ONE: A HIPPY HOMEMAKER AND THE BUSINESS OF WELLNESS

After viewing Andrew Nisker’s documentary *Chemerical: Redefining Clean for a New Generation* (2009), a young mother named Christina Anthis found herself outraged at the apparent lack of government regulation over the inclusion of “toxic ingredients” in food, cosmetics, and cleaning supplies. Determined to protect her family, she started making changes in their household by adjusting dietary choices, using environmentally friendly cleaning products, and incorporating holistic treatments like aromatherapy and herbalism. But her interventions went beyond her domestic behavior and consumption practices; she also started a blog about these choices. At *TheHippyHomemaker.com* Christina writes frequently about her path to finding “true health” through “natural and chemical free” means, with regular posts on topics ranging from organic mattresses and do-it-yourself (DIY) immune support to natural pet care and detoxifying teas. On her site’s landing page, an image of the author – smiling and standing slightly off-kilter, wearing a headband and sundress at the edge of a wooded area – initially dominates the screen, a visual embodiment of the blog’s subtitle: “Living Life in Peace, Love, & Hippiness.”

In a series of eight blog posts detailing her “medical journey,” collectively titled “A Little Further Down the Rabbit Hole,” Christina explains how her childhood was plagued by a series of health problems that continued into her adult years: neurological abnormalities, a tethered spinal cord, nerve pain, scoliosis, and endometriosis. These stories are bookended by a somewhat vague discussion of perceived cause-and-effect relationships. Part 1 starts with a general statement about the dangers of chemicals in cleaning and beauty products, and describes substances such as high fructose corn syrup in foods as unregulated, worrisome, and unsafe (Anthis, 2012a). The
series’ final post includes claims about the power of “positive thinking” and suggests that changes in diet and avoidance of endocrine-disrupting chemicals kept her family from contracting common illnesses and cured many of Christina’s own other ailments as well (Anthis, 2012b). Certainly, she highlights a correlation between the lifestyle changes and health improvements. This relationship is presented as a causal one, yet no empirical verification is offered and alternative explanations are not considered.

As a blogger, Christina is writing from multiple subject positions: as a person who has experienced difficult health-related challenges, as a concerned wife and mother, and as a “self-branding” entrepreneur, reliant on the currency of the reputation she is building through her blog (Gill, 2008; Hearn, 2010). She clearly has a degree of awareness regarding the problematic manner in which the U.S. government oversees certain consumer product markets, and finds this to be an issue of concern. Insufficient oversight, combined with ineffectual regulatory agencies, is a complex political issue with many contributing factors and potential outcomes. Stolle and Micheletti (2013) explain that the traditional political model, where the government of a nation-state is expected to swiftly address problems that threaten the health or safety of the citizenry, is often ineffective when the problems in question are widespread and complicated. Safe regulation of an entire market is such a situation, and the limitation in efficacy is due to a lack of clearly identifiable wrongdoers coupled with the fact that problems grow incrementally, which “[makes] it difficult to hold specific actors answerable as the source” of the threats (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013, p. 8).

But rather than advocate change through “traditional” political activism, Christina has made the problem an individual one and taken personal responsibility for addressing this systemic failure of political institutions. Her solutions are based in consumer politics and
lifestyle politics, modes of political expression that have become increasingly popular for
citizens – especially millennial citizens – in neoliberal culture (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee,
2012; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009). Posts on The Hippy Homemaker blog encourage readers –
who are presumably mostly women – to make lifestyle choices like those adopted by Christina
herself, reinforcing the gendered expectation that women are responsible for creating and
sustaining healthy, happy selves and families (Barnett, 2006; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). This
extra burden women bear with regard to affective labor is of course not new, but the focus on
individualized “techniques of the self” as protection against the negative externalities created by
industrial expansion and a shrinking social safety net is a distinctly neoliberal development
(Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Maintaining good health and a clean environment are positioned as
personal obligations, and as gendered behaviors which must be strategically pursued through
individual choices and actions (Barnett, 2006; Gill, 2008). While Christina’s posts may not be
explicitly political in nature, the issues she discusses most certainly are. This politicized
dimension of her blog, and others like it, invites additional consideration about the discursive
construction of gender and political engagement in an increasingly digital, post-Fordist
neoliberal society.

Christina, through her work as the Hippy Homemaker, is a representative of the
burgeoning “wellness industry,” a movement that purports to offer solutions to health problems
both physical and mental. Wellness-seekers are a lifestyle association, composed of individuals
who share a set of values and beliefs, working on a reflexive project of identity construction
under the guidance of various experts (Binkley, 2007). While the word “health” is frequently
applied, the implication is that wellness is less an achievable state – being in possession of the
“ability to function free of ailments” – than it is a “journey” or an ongoing process of transformation (Avins, 2017, para. 11)

The business of wellness relies heavily on blogs and other new media to create “expert” figures of both the celebrity (Jessica Alba, Blake Lively, Gwyneth Paltrow) and “regular person” varieties (Amanda Chantal Bacon, Ella Mills). The modern wellness industry valorizes natural or holistic approaches to pursuing health, led predominantly by guru-like feminine figures espousing the benefits of everything from foam rolling and Ayurvedic medicine to “enlightened” eating, juice-based diets, and “vaginal steaming” (although vaginal sunbathing is also a highly recommended practice) (Muhlke, 2017; Young, 2017). While some of these behaviors are frequently dismissed as pseudoscience, in wellness discourse they are framed as almost radical acts of refusal, a way for “conscious” people to position themselves outside the mainstream medical system and traditional consumer capitalism. This message belies the existence of an extremely profitable “global wellness economy” worth a self-estimated $3.7 trillion (Global Wellness Institute, 2017).

Wellness implies a dedication to both mental and physical health, and eco-friendliness is a central (if sometimes vaguely defined) commitment performed through targeted (or limited) consumption. On blogs, images of impeccably-plated vegan meals, fresh-looking homemade facial treatments, and photogenic families frolicking outdoors generate an aesthetic that feels like a soothing antidote to anxiety-inducing news stories about dangers lurking in processed food or the health risks associated with plastic water bottles. Wellness is visually and discursively constructed in these texts as a process of being, a self-selected manner of living that may be achieved by making “correct” decisions about self-care, childcare, diet, household behaviors, and the like. Many of these choices involve opting to buy – or not buy – a particular product or
brand, although DIY production (for example, through crafting, gardening, or making beauty products) is often a valorized behavior. Readers are encouraged to reject the environmentally destructive and morally vacuous homogenized commodities of consumer capitalism in favor of “niche-marketed products bearing the stamp of rebellion, authenticity, simplicity, economic justice and ecological responsibility,” which in turn are associated with “deeper meanings to wider life problems” (Binkley, 2008, p. 599).

The most successful wellness bloggers, who are often referred to in celebrity-focused media and by pop culture critics as “lifestyle influencers,” create content that can help them book speaking engagements, secure cookbook contracts, or sell products like Amanda Chantal Bacon’s Moon Juice collection (sample item: “Brain Dust,” an “adaptogenic blend of enlightening superherbs” which promises to “align you with the cosmic flow” for around $50). Gwyneth Paltrow’s famed Goop – an email-newsletter-turned-lifestyle-site and several associated wellness businesses – hosts an annual $650-minimum ticket summit, receives nearly 4 million monthly page views, and sells $90 vitamin packs with catchy names like “Why Am I so Effing Tired?” (Mullany, 2015; Raphael, 2017). While Christina Anthis’s sphere of influence might be smaller than these well-known figures, she is using a similar business model to work toward achieving the same effect.

The Hippy Homemaker blog includes a “Products I Love” category of posts, each containing direct links to external web pages where the featured items can be purchased (most frequently, these links send readers to online mega-mall Amazon.com; Christina earns a portion of the revenue from any sale there that originates from her site). Similar affiliate links are also a common feature in DIY or recipe posts, where readers can click to purchase specifically branded individual ingredients. In addition to this sort of camouflaged advertising -- which Mara Einstein
(2016) calls “sponsored word-of-mouth” marketing, since it gives the appearance of being an organic or unmotivated recommendation -- more obvious ads for natural products take up most of the right-hand side of the blog’s landing page.

But the revenue flow is not limited to sponsored blog content. The official Hippy Homemaker site, hosted on WordPress, is only followed by around 600 viewers, but Christina’s social media numbers are much higher. Her Facebook page has over 106,000 likes and 104,000 followers, and her page prominently features another link to Amazon, where viewers can purchase her recently released Complete Book of Essential Oils for Mama and Baby (Anthis, 2017). In addition to recent posts about the book, the Facebook wall features videos of Christina offering homemaking tips as well as a clip of a recent collaboration between The Hippy Homemaker and the corporate grocery chain Sprouts. Product giveaways are common, such as a July 2017 contest in which viewers could enter to win Naturepedic organic cotton pillows and an organic sheet set. Entry and winner selection is facilitated by the Rafflecopter widget, a service that collects user data (including email address) and chooses random prizewinners. The Facebook page also includes links to other social media sites: Instagram, where Christina has over 5,000 followers; Twitter (over 1,400 followers); and Pinterest (nearly 11,000 followers). Finally, in the “About” section of the Facebook page is a link to The Hippy Homemaker’s Etsy Shoppe, where readers can purchase “all-natural organic goodies” like aromatherapy candles and room sprays. (Although the shop lists another woman as its administrator, it shares branding with the blog and Facebook group and the products presumably originated from Anthis’s own aromatherapist and herbalist education and her status a member of the Aromatherapy Registration Council.) Using these various interactive techniques, The Hippy Homemaker
generates revenue for herself but also for the companies she touts and the social media platforms that host her content, for whom user data is an extremely valuable commodity.

**Networked Publics and Lifestyle Politics**

How can we understand the gendered, consumerist, individualist, and environmental implications of “green domesticity” sites like The Hippy Homemaker? My dissertation examines this subset of wellness-focused blogs, specifically those that focus on eco-friendly (“green”) domesticity, a category of practices that encompasses natural parenthood, toxin-free household maintenance, organic nutrition, and holistic self-care. In these online spaces, I argue, the discursive reinforcement of individualized lifestyle practices – especially related to environmentally conscious, wellness-driven behaviors – contributes to the construction of neoliberal citizen identity and the decentralization of expertise and knowledge, with a tendency to replace these with branded goods and services. These blogs, then, often illustrate where old hierarchies (individualism, consumerism) are getting remade in the new digital world.

By looking closely at The Hippy Homemaker, along with over twenty additional green domesticity blogs, my goal is to strengthen the connection between two established areas of digital cultural research. First, on the one hand, feminist scholars have been considering the nature and function of “women’s work” (i.e., primarily affective immaterial labor) in the digital communicative sphere (Jarrett, 2014; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). Closely related critical scholarship has examined trends such as flexible identity construction (Papacharissi, 2011; Dean, 2005); self-commodification or self-branding and the presentation of a postfeminist “authentic self” (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2017; Hearn, 2010); and structures of exclusion in the sphere of affective immaterial digital labor that have created new types of class division while limiting
participation to mostly white, educated, and affluent young women (boyd, 2011; Gill, 2010). More on this issue of gendered digital labor will be discussed below.

On the other hand, scholars in a second area of digital research like Dean (2005), Stolle and Micheletti (2014), Sunstein (2017), and Bennett (2012; see also Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011) – among many others – are doing work that considers what new forms of political speech and engagement might look like (or should look like) in a digital society. When apathy toward traditional civic engagement and community organizing is growing, what “counts” as political expression? If faith in experts and “formal” expertise is waning (such as attacks on science involved with climate change), who decides what it means to be a citizen? Critical scholarship on this subject interrogates neoliberal selfhood and responsibilization. It also foregrounds questions of exploitation and surveillance in an era when consumerism and individualism are hegemonic ideologies and communication of all sorts has largely moved into the digital sphere, where it sits on platforms under corporate control (see, for example: Andrejevic, 2012; Couldry, 2010; Dean, 2005; Fuchs, 2010; Hearn, 2010; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011).

Green domesticity blogs offer an opportunity to bring these two areas of inquiry together. Broadly speaking, this research is intended to address questions about (gendered) political identity and expression under the influence of neoliberalism in a primarily digital culture, with a specific focus on environmentalism and concerns about the natural world. Although their work is far from “traditional” political blogs, eco-friendly lifestyle bloggers frequently share content that is implicitly political, even when those politics are not foregrounded. They exist at the intersections between internet users, their political beliefs, and new media technology, creating structures that boyd (2011) refers to as “networked publics,” which “allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes” (p. 39).
While the concept is somewhat slippery, a public can be understood as a group with a shared worldview or a communal understanding of society, and among whom there is a general consensus regarding collective interests (Livingstone, 2005). Alternatively, Fraser (1990) describes a public not necessarily as a group but rather as space, a site upon or within which discourses are constructed, opinions are shared, and identities are formed and performed. Couldry (2010) points out that in the age of digital communication, our expectations about what constitutes a public or what even qualifies as political organization have evolved to include “networks of people who have never met, with or without formal leadership…with multiple institutional supports or none at all” (p. 140). In other words, employing boyd’s (2011) terminology, the combination of digital space and digital community that forms around green domestic lifestyle blogs is an ideologically homogenous networked public.

Digital communities are spaces where personal decisions become political and traditional expertise is challenged (or undermined, in certain situations), and thus they have the potential to create generate awareness and encourage change; Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) refer to this as “self-actualizing” political behavior and argue that it is a central feature of a new paradigm in democratic citizenship. However, potential shortcomings of digital lifestyle politics include a limited focus on consumerism and performativity as viable political strategies, an unequal playing field created by lack of access to the resources which are required for meaningful participation, and the commercial nature of the spaces in which lifestyle politics are performed. Working within frameworks of critical theory (in particular, lenses of political economy, critical cultural studies, and feminist theory) and qualitative discourse analysis, this research analyzes
content gathered from relevant blogs, social media networks, and associated paratexts\(^1\) in order to identify discursive themes that presumably affect the direction and efficacy of performative, “intimate” political identities (i.e., those that are constituted by publicly displayed behavior and built around individualized and private obligations in the domestic sphere).

This dissertation examines how identity formation, based on lifestyle decisions and facilitated by “expert” guidance, is shaped by hegemonic neoliberal ideologies that push citizens to address collective political issues as personal concerns. This is a move toward consumerism, responsibilization, and individualization; together, these are the central characteristics of appropriate citizen-consumer behavior in a neoliberal or post-Fordist society. In this context, market rationality comes to dominate not only citizen-behaviors but also personal experiences and interactions; identity, labor, and citizenship are commodified. The green domesticity blogs illustrate the flexible and ongoing project of identity formation as it is guided by “lifestyle influencer” figures who (perhaps unintentionally) use their content and social media branding to reinforce neoliberalism and consumerism while generating profit for the corporate platforms on which the digital spaces are situated.

**Women’s Work in Cyberspace**

A major element of the dissertation focuses on the nature of gendered labor generally, but especially in the digital media environment. Historically, the domestic labor that goes into maintaining one’s home, family, and health have been categorized as “women’s work”, and although this work is frequently positioned in opposition to the “productive economics of the industrial workplace,” it ultimately sustains capitalism by providing healthy bodies for the

\(^1\) Unless otherwise specified, the term “blog” will be used to refer not only to the authors’ original blog spaces, but also to associated Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. Any additional elements (related publications, micro-commerce sites, etc.) will be specifically identified in relevant instances.
workforce (Barnett, 2006; Jarrett, 2014, p. 15). Similarly and at nearly every level, the work that sustains the eco-friendly wellness industry is primarily performed by women. Except in the most lucrative of cases (i.e., Paltrow- and Alba-levels of success), it is affective labor that takes place in the domestic sphere, reproductive in the traditional Marxist sense, but now permeated by postfeminist narratives of choice and empowerment (McRobbie, 2010). While these gendered divisions of labor are nothing new, they have grown increasingly visible in digital media culture and in a media-scape which Gill (2007) describes as being saturated with a postfeminist cultural sensibility. Adapting a term coined by Henry Jenkins (2006), Ouellette and Wilson (2011) describe this web of affective labor practices, now manifest across digital media channels, as a gendered feature of convergence culture. They suggest that the very visibility of such cultural practices activates (similarly gendered) templates of citizenship.

Growth in digital communication technologies has allowed young women – many of them mothers – to document and share their experiences as parents and homemakers. In this sharing, they have become part of an immaterial convergence economy in which user-generated content and data gathered through corporate surveillance work synergistically to create revenue and distribute it among various actors – but not equitably. It is difficult to categorize or neatly label this type of labor, which in Terranova’s (2000) often-cited terms is at once “voluntarily given and unwaged, [and] enjoyed and exploited” (p. 33). For Christina, the effort she applies to the maintenance of the Hippy Homemaker blog and its associated social media groups could reasonably be considered hope labor (Keuhn & Corrigan, 2013) or aspirational labor (Duffy, 2017), but her position of relative social privilege allows her to focus on this work with a level of dedication that would not be an option for many women. Her success as an influencer, while facilitated by her privilege, is still precarious and dependent on consistent self-promotion; the
wellness expert figure must appear knowledgeable, relatable, and always on-brand (Duffy & Hund, 2017; Schwab, 2016; Titton, 2015). Christina leverages her presence across several social media platforms, deliberately creating a “branded self” entity “in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit” (Hearn, 2010, p. 427). This branded self is especially crucial for lifestyle bloggers, because blogs succeed on the image of “authenticity” and “realness,” giving the illusion of existing “outside the economic strictures of parent companies and advertising contracts” (Hilgenberg, 2012, para. 9).

Immaterial affective labor is “an ideological process that legitimizes the power asymmetries of digital free labor,” thus contributing to the reproduction or reinforcement of digital capitalism (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 19). In other words, the bloggers’ work does more than directly produce financial revenue; it is also a form of knowledge labor (a designation, adapted by critical internet theorists, with roots in Hardt and Negri’s multitude) that reproduces and normalizes certain social standards and expectations which “generate other regimes of value that support and sustain the [neoliberal] capitalist system” (Jarrett, 2013, p. 16). Their work creates aesthetically appealing and often interactive content, which in turn supports the consumer capitalist economy by generating and subtly reinforcing specific beliefs, appearances, and desires (Fuchs, 2010). Interactivity in general has occasionally been lauded as a source of empowerment, allowing users of digital media to direct their own experiences and even “speak back” to media producers in a way that has previously been unavailable. However, interactive participation gave rise to networked social production, which in turn facilitates user-generated content and the collection of personal data; both have become sources of profit for the corporate entities that control digital platforms (Hearn, 2010; Scholz, 2008). Furthermore, even when ostensibly promoting a lifestyle that is critical of ordinary consumption, bloggers create a discourse of
specialized desire predicated on the imperative of wellness as an ongoing responsibility. According to Binkley (2008), their mediated expertise generates demand for non-traditional products but eventually that demand is captured by the market, thus “accelerat[ing] and intensify[ing] regular forms of consumption” (p. 602).

Even as a relatively new class of cultural elites, lifestyle experts have come to exercise significant control over discourse related to consumption. Professionals working in the advertising industry have structured consumer demand for the last century, but Bagdikian (1983) recognized a shift decades ago as the separation between ads and “non-sponsored” content became increasingly difficult to discern. Advertisers were able to exert a “subtle corruption,” manipulating the tone of media texts so that any challenge to the dominant consumer culture was eliminated. Creating positive feelings about consumerism in general was the new strategy, one which relied on the blurring of lines between sponsored and non-sponsored media content so that audiences would not be aware that the demands of advertisers were affecting the messages they saw and heard. Now, in lifestyle media, the strategy is again shifting. Rather than subtly associating products and purchasing with happiness and satisfaction, as advertisements have done for decades, lifestyle experts instruct audiences in the correct manner of selecting and purchasing products in order to meet the expectations of neoliberal citizenship.

**Researching Green Domesticity Blogs**

My analysis of the green domesticity networked public is of course concerned with content (messages, representations, visual aesthetics), because these are the resources from which meaning is constructed. However, I am also concerned with the digital architecture and capitalist ethos that structure a public’s online space, because making sense of discourse requires
careful consideration of social context. Specifically, convergence culture offers new techniques, new opportunities, and effectively limitless amounts of space for political expression (Dean, 2005, p. 54). New communication technologies have facilitated the rise of “networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions” that today form around various political issues (Bennett, 1998, p. 745). But even an optimistic evaluation of digital lifestyle politics must account for the fact that most of this activity takes place within a privatized digital infrastructure, where various corporate actors strategically deploy various interactive techniques to generate profit from multiple (and ever-evolving) revenue streams. We saw this with The Hippy Homemaker and her links to mega-sites like Amazon and Facebook. My first research question is focused on identifying these structures and techniques of interactivity in order to consider how they advance the needs of corporate actors:

**RQ1:** What digital structures or mechanisms of interactivity are prevalent in the blogs, and how are they related to the logics of corporate platform owners and advertisers?

In terms of a primary practical function, the blogs in my sample focus on helping readers live in an eco-friendly manner. The women who create and participate in these online communities express anxiety over the pressing social issues of their generation, particularly health threats from environmental degradation and overconsumption. Their conversations focus on a range of historically feminized issues including household tasks, childcare, crafting, shopping, and dietary practices. Altogether, these topics compose a set of lifestyle choices (or distinctions, to use Bourdieu’s terminology), which have become a central component of identity formation in late-modern capitalist society. In this context, intimate behaviors take on a political dimension; adopting certain practices while rejecting others based on a commitment to eco-
friendly living and the pursuit of wellness is an expression of personal agency. Lifestyle associations tend to cultivate homogeneity of perspective, a uniformity which seemingly translates to a general lack of diversity in this digital community. While each blogger has a unique aesthetic, rhetoric, and range of focus, many of them have similar background stories (one common narrative involves leaving the corporate workplace after becoming a mother) and share significant characteristics of identity (age, ethnicity, education, economic class, and so on). The often-invisible or downplayed labor that is required to keep the blog networks running – and the commodified identities of the workers who perform it – is another central factor affecting the way that identity and agency are constructed. My second research question addresses these issues of identity and labor in the network of green domesticity bloggers:

RQ2: How are discourses of agency and identity constructed in green domesticity blogs, and what are their implications, including the potential exclusion of specific groups of women?

2a: How are affective immaterial labor and self-commodification part of the construction of agency and identity?

Like the Hippy Homemaker, many of the bloggers in my sample feel vulnerable when facing the collective health risks related to lax market oversight and unenforced environmental regulation. Overwhelmingly, what they offer readers is not a systemic solution but rather “individualized acts of self-protection” (Szasz, 2007, p. 3). Posts that focus on domesticity, motherhood, and DIY-ism offer guidance around the threats, both physical and psychological, posed by widespread environmental degradation, political and economic uncertainty, and consumer culture. The typically suggested ameliorative actions are self- or family-focused behaviors often based on nostalgic appeals to traditionally (but not unproblematically)
“feminine” aesthetics, knowledges, and domestic skills. Advice is generally based on an author’s own stated rationale for why going green is necessary; while their reasoning is not always presented using *explicitly* politicized language, the health risks associated with widespread environmental degradation are collectively-borne and therefore inherently political. Thus, their guidance is at least *implicitly* politicized. My third set of research questions is concerned with the discursive construction of political challenges and provision of potential solutions in green domestic lifestyle blogs:

**RQ3:** How do the bloggers frame environmental issues?

3a: What are the prevalent narratives about the significance of eco-friendly living, and what solutions are most commonly offered to mitigate environmental risk?

3b: Are any additional issues of social or political significance addressed?

The frames bloggers employ to discuss issues of environmental concern are likely to affect the audience’s perception of the issue in question, but frames also tell us something about the worldview and political subjectivity of the authors who employ them. In the 23 blogs I examined, some of the most common discursive threads about political concerns and personal responsibility reveal a complicated relationship between the bloggers’ desire to create positive changes, constrained opportunities for (meaningful) political expression in neoliberal convergence culture, and the capitalist structures – ideological and digital/spatial – that affect the spaces in which these processes play out. Careful consideration of green domesticity blogs offers a way to understand the potential utility, complexity, and limitations of their (always and already politicized) content. This is the focus of my final research question.
RQ4: Considering the politicized nature of their content, how do green domesticity blogs contribute to altering discourses of citizenship and commodifying participation in neoliberal society?

Part of the immaterial labor involved in blogging can be classified as knowledge labor. This is a category of work that exists outside the system of waged labor, adapted slightly from Hardt and Negri’s concept of the labor performed by the multitude, used by Terranova (2000) and refined by Fuchs (2010), among others; it is explored in more detail in the following chapter. Ultimately, knowledge labor makes the blogs commercially valuable and reinforces capitalism but it typifies the flexible yet precarious work that has become a hallmark of neoliberal society. Certainly in the case of these bloggers, their knowledge work should be taken seriously as a form of (again, implicit) political expression, even though it is constrained by the external pressure of neoliberal ideologies. At its core, this problem is one of commodification: of labor, of citizenship practices, knowledge, identity, digital spaces, and politics. The content green domestic bloggers produce may be framed as a challenge to neoliberalism but as it originated within that framework, though it is well-intentioned and not without utility, the challenge is likely to be insubstantial in terms of generating large-scale change.

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation consists of five additional chapters, starting in Chapter Two with a literature review that explores several areas of critical research related to the nature of femininity and practices of domesticity in neoliberal culture, where citizenship becomes a continuous and individual project of self-improvement through lifestyle behavior. Scholarship that interrogates the unique demands placed on women who work in digital lifestyle media is also highlighted,
particularly recent literature focused on the construction of identity and function of digital labor in fashion blogs (which in many ways served as a starting point for this research). Chapter Three, which covers methodology, begins with a brief overview of the critical approach to media studies research and the “problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement” of critical discourse analysis, a type of scholarship that is primarily interested in identifying how meaning is made, and power is maintained, through discourse (Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2013, p. 357). The chapter goes on to provide specific accounts of the political economic and feminist frameworks that situate my analysis, followed by a comprehensive description of my research process and a detailed discussion of which textual features were included. Chapter Three concludes with some preliminary information about the blogs and their authors.

Chapter Four explores issues related to interactivity, consumerism, and the structure of the green domesticity blog network. This includes addressing RQ1 and considering how the participatory architecture of digital space is designed to serve the interests of various corporate entities, but the chapter also considers how the bloggers’ labor contributes to creating content that works within those spaces. Their work generates personal financial revenue, but creates profit on a larger scale for service providers and advertisers, both through the content bloggers produce and the identities they must also cultivate. This process of identity construction in a corporate, commodified space is connected to RQ2. Self-branding is a central part of the process, and generally relies on projecting authenticity and relatability to readers. This branding or self-commodification is part of building a currency of reputation which increases their value to potential advertisers and other corporate partners (Hearn, 2010). But the audience’s expectation of authentic and relatable figures, “average women” with whom they can connect, also means that the labor bloggers put into creating and maintaining their brands and networks is generally
rhetorically minimized or even rendered invisible, an issue that pertains to RQ2a. This is particularly concerning because it is essentially the digital update to a longstanding pattern of marginalizing what Jarrett (2014) calls “women’s work” (Hollows (2005) offers an enlightening take on this issue, which will be developed further in Chapter Two).

I found a significant number of overlapping narratives about the authors’ inspiration and the goals they had for their blogs, which are also explored in Chapter Four. Most commonly, bloggers shared stories of how health-related challenges or parenthood (and frequently both) generated anxiety about the efficacy of traditional medicine, the safety of our food supply, and the presence of harmful chemicals in other consumer products. Almost all the women directly expressed a desire to help educate readers about eco-friendly living, thus conveying a sense of expertise on the matter. Yet many blogs also prominently featured disclaimers about their authors’ imperfections and regular failures, contributing to their authentic, relatable personas. These patterns are illustrative of neoliberal citizenship expectations and are examined as part of a postfeminist sensibility that encourages identity construction through lifestyle and self-branding. Chapter Four chapter closes with a consideration of how this collection of practices normalizes individualism and personal micropolitics at the expense of collective action. Additionally, full-time commitment to motherhood and housewifery was consistently framed as a freely chosen – and therefore empowering – alternative to waged employment outside the home.

Chapter Five moves on to a more specific treatment of how the work of green domesticity bloggers “counts” as political expression even if the authors themselves do not present it that way. Since wellness and green domesticity are consistently presented as ongoing lifestyle projects, expression becomes part of the process of “flexible” neoliberal identity construction. Rather than a simple matter of personal preference, eco-friendly living and the
pursuit of what many bloggers call wellness, balance, or “true health” (terms which again seem to refer not to a state of being but rather to a status of working toward) are established as obligations for neoliberal citizens, particularly women. Discussions about environmental concerns are most often tied to the provision of care or protection for oneself or one’s family, and the reasons for living an eco-friendly life are rarely connected to larger structural issues. Rather they are associated with the “journey” of wellness, both physically and psychologically, which requires labor and is the duty of the (feminine) neoliberal subject. This chapter also explores another issue of political significance, the discursive reinforcement of feminine expectations related not only to domestic labor and motherhood, but also to the female body as a site of surveillance and self-discipline. Combined with the pervasive environmentalist rhetoric, being appropriately “beautiful” is naturalized, becoming just a hashtag or category or tab along with all the others. Narrow ideals of beauty and hygiene are relayed through blog content focused on environmentally friendly personal care products such as facial treatments and makeup, underlined by an almost universal failure to question the necessity of such products to begin with. These issues create a foundation on which to address RQ4, because they both point to consumerism as a viable way to approach political or social problems. They reinforce the individualist rhetoric of neoliberal citizenship, legitimize lifestyle politics, and commodify not only the authors’ identities and labor (as mentioned above), but also the very notion of political participation.

The first part of Chapter Six combines the analysis from the previous two chapters and uses critical theory to identify explanatory communicative frames that exist not just in structure or discourse separately, but when taken together as a whole text. Analysis is summarized in order to identify patterns of commodification that have developed throughout the green domesticity
networked public. These explanatory frames and patterns are then considered alongside the hegemonic ideologies – relating to gender, class, consumerism, labor, and digital media – in which they are situated, keeping in mind the unsettled nature of power and the dialectical relationship between discourse and dominant social structures. The chapter closes with my final thoughts about the green domestic blog movement and a reflection on some limitations and the potential for future research, including possible applications for scholarship about other types of blogs and social media networks.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

For younger citizens of the United States and other neoliberal countries, three systemic political issues of particular concern to millennials are the recent destabilization of the U.S. economy, looming environmental threats, and partisan gridlock within the U.S. government (Binder, 2014). The early-2010s economic downturn, marked by the Great Recession that followed the collapse of the domestic housing market in 2007 and the subsequent spike in unemployment and underemployment, has had a profound effect on younger workers because they tend to have easily disrupted or non-linear work experiences, especially in an economy that is increasingly digital and information-based. Although more millennials attend college than previous generations, they are also saddled with a ballooning amount of student loan debt (for degrees that are no longer any guarantee of fulfilling employment). Environmental degradation and the threats it poses to human health are another source of worry for many young families, who are aware that the ecological problems facing us are interconnected and complex (WWF, 2009). Pollution, renewable energy, genetically modified organisms, dangerous chemicals in consumer products, the depletion of natural resources, and climate change are all stated issues of concern for young people (Barclay, 2014; Koch, 2014).

In the U.S., enacting legislative measures to address economic and environmental problems seems increasingly unlikely due to the extremely divisive and partisan climate in national politics, which is another source of anxiety and frustration for millennial citizens. Government gridlock has roughly doubled since the late 1950s, according to a 2014 report from Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Sarah Binder, who notes that increased gridlock has also fueled growth in the number of salient issues on our political agenda. With more unresolved
issues garnering attention and appearing repeatedly in mass media coverage of national politics, citizens may feel increasingly overwhelmed or come to view political institutions as hopelessly complicated. This often results in feelings of disenfranchisement among young voters who may elect to ignore traditional politics altogether. Magnifying the effect of all these concerns is the belief, expressed by two-thirds of the American public, that special corporate interests are firmly in control of government (Nichols & McChesney, 2013, para. 5). According to Bennett (1998), a pronounced embrace of lifestyle politics is a common and logical reaction to this neoliberal dilemma.

**Neoliberalism and Governmentality**

Over the past several decades, some Western nations have experienced a neoliberal turn, in which governance is based on the extension of free-market economic rationality into the non-market sectors of everyday life (Kuehn, 2009). The result, a neoliberal social ethos that guides interaction among people in both formal institutional contexts and informal civil society, is partially characterized by a steadfast commitment to individualism. This sentiment is perhaps best represented by the late conservative British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s infamous quote: “There is no such thing as ‘society.’ There are just individuals and their families” (Jhally, 2006, p. 105). Another central neoliberal belief is the supremacy of privatization, which holds that firms operating in free markets perform better than government when it comes to providing prosocial services like ending hunger and homelessness, eradicating diseases, and cleaning up the environment (Einstein, 2012, p. 101). This valorization of individualism and market rationality was initially propagated by conservatives but has certainly been mutually constituted by waning faith in government efficacy among liberals and conservatives alike. Especially for
the younger generations of U.S. citizens, neoliberal ideology has been effectively internalized (Vromen, Loader, & Xenos, 2015). The responsible neoliberal “citizen-consumer” – a descriptive term which clarifies that appropriate civic action is based on market logic – is expected to ignore the institutional origins of poor health, unemployment, climate change, and so on, and instead manage individual wellbeing (re-conceptualized as various forms of “health”: physical, mental, financial, ecological, etc.) without the aid of government or social support (Einstein, 2012).

Ouellette and Hay (2008) contrast today’s neoliberal society, in which the U.S. government avoids intervening in “privatized networks of welfare administration,” with the mid-century Progressive Era, when the focus was on legislative reform rather than personal responsibility and self-regulation as paths to empowerment; they conclude that substantive social change is more likely in the progressive paradigm (p. 476). Under current neoliberal cultural conditions, the obligation to address various social ills (which are often the direct result of unchecked economic growth and unregulated corporate autonomy) has been shifted away from government and industry and onto individual people. This process, known as responsibilization, effectively trains the population to internalize blame and act as “self-governing subjects rather than critical, active citizens,” which encourages the acceptance of minimal state intervention (MacGregor, 2007, p. 5; Rose, 1999).

**Governmentality and Discourse**

The responsibilization phenomenon fits into the Foucauldian framework of governmentality, in which networks of power influence conformity with hegemonic social values.
in a not-strictly-hierarchical manner, outside of formal political or social structures. Ouellette and Hay (2008) describe governmentality as “the processes through which individuals shape and guide their own conduct – and that of others – with certain aims and objectives in mind” (p. 473). Discourse plays an essential role in governmentality, acting as a conduit for information about status quo expectations and technologies of neoliberal citizenship. This process is enacted through social pressure and operates through ideology rather than through a linear or top-down model of power. Ideology is a somewhat murky term, but a functional – rather than merely theoretical – definition is given by Stuart Hall (1995): ideology consists of “images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p.18). Starting from the Althusserian claim that ideology is what hails individuals as subjects, Jhally (2006) suggests that ideological discourses allow us to “recognize ourselves as social constituted individuals in our own particular culture” (p. 135). According to Thornton (2015), Foucault’s argument that power operates through ideologies as conduits in a multi-directional network fostered “new ways of seeing that focused on the way fields of action are structured through discourse,” a more fluid conceptualization of how power is exercised in a neoliberal era (p. 43-44).

Discourse constructs belief about the legitimacy of authority-granting social structures like education, law, medicine, and politics; these structures then affect the direction of human agency but not absolutely so. Active control over discourse is not evenly distributed among all people. Rather, members of more powerful social groups have a more pronounced ability to influence discourse formation (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 356). In fact, while their power originates from various social privileges like financial resources or education, this ability to control discourse is the arguably central instrument through which power is maintained. Dominant
discourses help certain groups sustain influence by defining and valorizing particular forms of expertise. For example, lawyers maintain their power by controlling legal discourse, doctors and psychiatrists legitimize their power by defining mental and physical illness (and by continually updating said definitions) (Foucault, 1972). In this process, mass media serve as a place where competing discourses are relayed and negotiated between those who seek to protect their dominance and those who would challenge the status quo (Storey, 1994). Although it is not distributed equitably, power is not static or settled but rather subject to ongoing negotiations between various social classes. The balance of power shifts; as Williams (1977) says, “[it] has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” because it is “continually resisted, limited, altered and challenged” (p. 122).

In neoliberal society, a relatively new class of cultural elites have come to exercise control over discourse related to everyday, private-sphere conduct: lifestyle experts, who offer guidance about “ordinary” modes of knowledge and skills (Lewis, 2008). While their expertise is not usually based on traditionally-recognized formal training, through their advice they enact a soft form of social control, which Rosenberg (2011) describes as “governance at a distance” (p. 174). While the influence of “expert knowledge holders who act as gatekeepers” still exists to some extent, new communication technologies have created space for new forms of knowledge and expertise to challenge that regime (Banet-Weiser & Gray, 2009, p. 15).

Identity Formation in a Post-Fordist Era

Bendle (2002) suggests that identity may be visualized in a variety of ways, including as an indication of “similarity and difference involving social, racial, ethnic or gender categories”
and the variable context of one’s class position (p. 5). Although it may operate below the threshold of consciousness, identity refers to the way that people see themselves and their beliefs about what type of person they are. Traditionally, close connections to one’s religion, ethnicity, political party, and locality structured a person’s identity (Horton, 2004). For much of human history these were experienced as relatively stable and collective traits, but urbanization loosened bonds to identity-forming institutions and the traits became less durable. Especially in recent decades, cultural and economic changes have contributed to this general destabilization of identity and an increase in the salience of group identification based on other characteristics (Bauman, 2007, 2011; Binkley, 2008).

**Lifestyle as (performed) identity**

When ties to traditional social structures such as family, community, religion, and party are weakened (as is the case in late modern, neoliberal society; see Lipsitz, 1990) people turn instead to lifestyle associations and their characteristic behaviors as visual markers of identity, through which a status of belonging to certain social groups or sub-groups can be expressed (Chaney, 1996; Thomas, 2008). Colloquially, the word “lifestyle” is used to describe a self-selected manner of living. The term broadly connotes a grouping of individuals who share a set of values and beliefs (see Benedikter, 2012), but such a loose definition applies easily to various other types of identity as well. In fact, a clear distinction between traditional identity formations and lifestyle is difficult to articulate, but David Chaney (1996) describes the more rooted and stable factors as contributing to a “way of life,” whereas lifestyles are more ephemeral. Binkely (2007) has suggested that lifestyle is a “personal identity project of personal choosing,” and “part of a reflexive project in which individuals works [sic] on themselves to create an identity” (p. 112). Compared to the formation of identity in the traditional sense, this process is less likely to
operate at a sub-conscious level, as decisions about behavior must be at least somewhat deliberate (even if their rationale is not always explicitly recognized by the practitioner). Lifestyle-based identities are enacted at the individual level through private-sphere individualized behaviors, and thus are far more compatible with the neoliberal social model than traditional identities.

In addition to being a flexible and reflexive personal project, lifestyle is often described as an unsteady sort of identity formation, partially because of the perceived association between lifestyle choices and consumption (Bennett, 1998; Featherstone, 1987). The construction and maintenance of lifestyles is connected to beliefs about consumer choice, which renders them unstable and uncertain, connected to a quickly-evolving commodity culture. In his later work, Bauman (2000, 2007b) described this condition as “liquid modernity,” characterized by impermanence in relationships, identities, and economics. In liquid modernity (akin to postmodernity, as opposed to a more “solid” traditional modernity), lasting social bonds are weakened and replaced by consumer culture as the central constitutive feature of identity (Binkley 2008). Discourses that create meaning in consumer society make frequent references to commodities and brands, and are circulated among consumer-citizens largely through media texts such as advertising; Jhally (2006) sees this commodified creation of symbolic meaning as the result of a decline in the influence of traditional social institutions (i.e., those that used to play a significant role in stable identity formation). The symbolic meaning of commodities changes over time through cycles of fashion, and since consumer lifestyles are based on that very symbolism, they “tend to dissolve identities into fleeting, fragmented, and provisional constructions” (Binkley, 2007, p. 114). A consequence of this association between lifestyle and
commodity consumption has been the adoption of “lifestyle” categories as marketing frameworks, a process that is frequently enacted within the green domesticity networked public.

Even if they are fleeting, consumer lifestyles have become the foundation for how we see ourselves (in other words, of our identity), and the expression of that vision may indicate both sameness (similarity to other members of the lifestyle group) and distinction (rejection, in some sense, of the habits and beliefs of those outside the group). Material relations in everyday life are performative and the deliberate manner in which the neoliberal consumer-citizen approaches consumption functions (among other things) as a signal to others, based on the current cultural meaning of the commodities one chooses to purchase or reject. This marketizing of social and interpersonal relations is highly compatible with neoliberal ideology. The connection between lifestyle and consumerism also implies class-based barriers to entry, as the act of shopping for purposes of social differentiation (conspicuous consumption, to borrow Thorstein Veblen’s term) requires a certain amount of financial freedom. Yet, Chaney’s (1996) assertion that lifestyles are not simply a matter of consumption and therefore aren’t the exclusive domain of the economically privileged is significant. He instead sees lifestyle as a creative project that requires access to other types of privilege like particular spaces as well as symbolic and strategic knowledge, an argument that could be bolstered by pointing to the fact that some lifestyles become influential or trendy even though they are based wholly or in part on a rejection of consumption (Thomas, 2008). However, as noted in the previous section, even deliberate rejection of consumerism is an action that is concerned with and defined by consumer activity; to modify Veblen’s phrasing, such a rejection amounts to a conspicuous absence of consumption.
Lifestyle and consumer politics

As previously noted, consumption choices are not limited to the question of what to buy; for other individuals (still acting as such), their lifestyle is one of not buying. In other words, while for some environmentalists consumption is not restricted but rather modified based on a level of commitment to the cause, others define commitment to the environmentalist lifestyle as anti-consumerism (Gilbert, 2008). However, Binkley (2008) cautions that the practices of sustainable consumption and anti-consumerism are not actually all that different since both are defined by consumption. Simply consuming less is not an adequate political strategy because it is still private and individualized (Sandilands, 1993). Other research suggests that making appeals to behavior changes based on materialistic values may actually counteract motivation towards engaging in collective prosocial behavior (WWF, 2009). Consumer campaigns (such as boycotts and buycotts, common strategies for advocates of “consumer democracy”) often require a certain amount of affluence, whether financial or in terms of education and access to information, meaning that they are not equally viable for all citizens (Maxwell & Miller, 2012). High-profile campaigns may be deemed successful when in reality they have just encouraged corporations to find ways more sophisticated ways to hide the offending behavior.

Still, the idea that citizens may “vote with their dollars,” thereby effecting change in government policy or corporate behavior, or at least making up for the shortcomings thereof, is quite common and has been for some time. In 1996, a Roper Center report found that respondents favored “simple, individualized, and nongovernmental” solutions, even for complex social problems (Bennett, 1998). For still others, conscientious consumerism functions more as a marker of distinction rather than an indication of ideological commitment, an updated version of Veblen’s conspicuous consumption. In such cases ethical consumption becomes a material
signifier of one’s taste and, therefore, of class (to paraphrase a famous passage from Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, we distinguish ourselves by the distinctions we make). Corporate entities also may have good reason to deliberately associate their brand with ethical consumption through advertising and public relations campaigns, a phenomenon known as corporate social responsibility (CSR). In general, though, this should be seen as a strategic move to co-opt consumer activist sentiment and even preempt potential government regulation (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014). Whatever the actor and however justified, green consumerism rests on the transformation of traditional and collective political activism into commodity consumption, in which citizens become consumers² who can then be urged to invest in products that promise social justice, authenticity, and ecological responsibility (Binkley, 2008; Einstein, 2012). This is a transformation that mirrors the destabilization of rooted identity formations in late modernity and their replacement by lifestyle groups that reduce the “ethics and practices of selfhood and citizenship” to “a series of commodified cultural practices and lifestyle choices (Lewis, 2008).

Despite the expansion of the neoliberal social ethos and the corresponding erosion of stable identity formations, Bennett (1998) argues that political engagement among young citizens is not waning. Rather, we are now part of a society that is organized around “issue associations” and “lifestyle coalitions,” whose formation and maintenance is “facilitated by the revolution in personalized, point-to-point communication” (Bennett, 1998, p. 745). Lifestyle politics are an attempt to create bonds between people who may otherwise not be connected, but become so based on performances of shared social and political commitments. When facing social problems

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² The common referential term for this concept is “citizen-consumer,” but Mara Einstein (2012) suggests that it would be more honest to reverse that order, thereby clarifying which dimension is more important in neoliberal times.
that are complex, there is an understandable allure to solutions that are relatively “simple, individualized, and nongovernmental” (Bennett, 1998, p. 749). Thus, practitioners are offered a feeling of security: that they can be ethical, proactive, and effective by building and sustaining their brand of lifestyle politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 129).

Purchasing decisions based on a desire to ameliorate, bring attention to, or at least not contribute to the perpetuation of various social ills are categorically referred to as conscientious or ethical consumption. Environmental degradation is one such consideration, but there are certainly others: personal health, animal cruelty, fair labor practices, and fair trade are just a few examples. People who engage in conscientious consumption often see themselves as taking individual steps toward solving systemic problems, which they see as a legitimate alternative to traditional political engagement (Bennett, 1998). When faced with anxiety-causing challenges like climate change, people may cope with the threat by using strategies that decrease their own fear but actually exacerbate the problem, such as revising materialistic goals or reinterpreting the nature of the threat (WWF, 2009). But according to Maxwell and Miller (2012), our current eco-crises did not originate within the home and so the problems we face cannot adequately be dealt with on that level. Moreover, individual consumption behavior does, in practical terms, nothing to rein in corporate power, which has already been identified as a central limitation on our collective ability enact structural change.

This sort of political expression is not reliant on the guidance or instruction of traditionally-defined experts but rather is guided by the more decentralized (and ostensibly participatory) experience of viewing peer performance of lifestyle, which often takes place in online spaces. Citizen identity becomes entwined with “intimate” or domestic identity, and choices about family life, parenting, diet, and commodity consumption take on political
significance. The ubiquity of lifestyle politics in neoliberal culture seems logical, because individualism and a personal sense of responsibility for addressing even structural social problems are central features of both.

**Modern Definitions of Political Participation**

In recent years, members of the millennial generation in the United States have begun to enter adulthood, join the workforce, and start new families. Having grown up during a time of economic instability, environmental uncertainty, and deeply partisan political gridlock, many of these young people seem outwardly disillusioned with industrial consumer culture and the American democratic process. They doubt the efficacy of their national government and have turned away from participating in electoral politics (Gilman & Stokes, 2014). This lack of faith in traditional civic engagement has, however, left room for other forms of political expression, including lifestyle-based politics and peer-to-peer engagement through online social networking. Portwood-Stacer (2013) defines *lifestyle politics* as the “cultural formation around individuals’ use of everyday choices as a legitimate site of political expression,” and argues that it has become a central feature of mainstream U.S. politics (p. 5). The spread of lifestyle politics has certainly been facilitated by the almost-universal adoption of the Internet as a primary conduit for both mass and interpersonal communication. As the first generation to have grown up completely surrounded by digital media and internet culture, many millennials are comfortable sharing detailed accounts of their lives and ideologies online. Before our lives became saturated with new media and characterized by connectivity, the visual signification of a person’s lifestyle association would have been observed primarily by those in close proximity to, or having frequent contact with, the adherent. But the drastic expansion in online communication has
created spaces for practitioners of particular lifestyle politics to record and display the minutiae of their day-to-day lives, sharing experiences and expertise (of a sort) using interactive and multi-modal media.

Democracy is not a static model of government. Rather, it has evolved and been shaped at various times by various socioeconomic movements and structures, perhaps the most influential of which has been the transition into a neoliberal economic model. Democracy and capitalism are, for citizens in many nations, inseparable concepts. Likewise, citizenship is a dynamic set of activities and attitudes that has shifted over time. A recent and very powerful influence on the way we view citizenship is the movement of mass communication and media content onto the Internet; however, the resultant shift is not distributed uniformly across the population of U.S. citizens. While discrepancies are not reducible to generational divides, younger citizens tend to view online political expression as valid democratic participation while older citizens value more traditional participatory behaviors and methods of information-gathering (Bennett et al., 2009). Certainly there is danger in reducing citizenship behavior to discussion via social networking, but taken-for-granted components of citizen identity like a strongly developed sense of party affiliation and rote memorization of details about government structure and the more arcane aspects of the political process might not be as valuable to millennials as they were to generations past (not least of all because such information is readily available online). Determining what constitutes citizenship and citizen identity in digital culture is a pressing matter; to understand digital citizenship we must also consider how digital infrastructures both shape and are shaped by broader civic culture (Couldry et al., 2014).

Especially among younger voters, general distrust of longstanding power structures – reinforced by their experience growing up in an age of hyper-partisan politics and economic
instability – has understandably validated a growing belief that traditional forms of political participation are insufficient to address daunting and complex issues of concern such as climate change, income inequality, and systemic racism. Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult to accurately identify trustworthy sources of expertise in an era of media proliferation; even before the issue of online “fake news” became a high-profile concern, politically-aware millennials had a general sense of understanding that experts can essentially be “bought and sold,” either literally by corporate interests or in a more figurative sense by political parties (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 78). Finally, the apparent solidity of the nation-state as a power structure (once taken as a given) has been undermined by economic globalization and growing corporate influence over government, so it makes sense that millennial citizens would turn away from traditional forms of civic engagement (i.e., “dutiful citizen” activities; see Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Vromen, Loader, & Zenos, 2015).

Digital Political Expression

The digital enactment or performance of lifestyle politics must be understood in its cultural context as a pedagogy of neoliberal citizenship, meant to influence and guide everyday behaviors toward a particular (political) end. Prominent discourses in online spaces where lifestyle politics are performed therefore may be interpreted as techniques of governmentality, conduits through which neoliberal ideology is “circulated in a highly dispersed fashion by social and cultural intermediaries” rather than being passed down directly to citizens from the state (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 473).

Some argue that engagement through interactive online media indicates an expansion in social activism that has allowed greater numbers of people to participate in political
conversations and debates more readily than ever before, but others point out that interactivity itself is not evidence of empowerment (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2014; Gilman & Stokes, 2014). This debate is most often focused on the potential for traditional political activism, in the sense of measuring the likelihood that digital engagement will lead to explicitly political “real world” activity like protesting, petitioning, campaigning, and voting (central characteristics of Bennett, Wells, and Rank’s (2009) “dutiful citizen” paradigm). But for millennials, these forms of traditional democratic participation are less common. Instead, they tend to spend more effort volunteering than engaging in electoral politics (Stone, 2009). They are less likely than previous generations to be attached to social institutions like political parties and religious groups (which do still tend to be associated with greater levels of electoral participation), but their status as “digital natives” who have grown up in an era where networked communication and digital interactivity is the norm has led to a greater sense of personal connection through digital networks (Pew Research Center, 2014). And they have come of age in an era when lifestyle decisions are associated with political engagement and awareness, where visible manifestations of lifestyle choices are signifiers of political beliefs, communicating “who people are and who they want to be” to those around them (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 4).

On one hand, digital communities are spaces where personal decisions become political and traditional expertise is challenged, and thus they have the potential to create generate awareness and encourage change; Bennett, Wells, and Rank (2009) refer to this as “self-actualizing” political behavior and argue that it is a central feature of a new paradigm in democratic citizenship. On the other hand, potential shortcomings of digital lifestyle politics include a limited focus on consumerism and performativity as viable political strategies, an unequal playing field created by lack of access to the resources which are required for
meaningful participation, and the commercial nature of the spaces in which lifestyle politics are performed.

Whether or not lifestyle politics and digital engagement actually represent “legitimate” political expression is an unsettled and rather contentious question among academics. Skeptics argue that lifestyle is primarily expressed through consumerism, which is facilitated by the Internet, an association that undermines the ability of “lifestyle” to serve as a catalyst for substantive political change (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dean, 2005; Einstein, 2012). Furthermore, some worry that lifestyle expression, even if it is intended to signal commitment to a particular political ideology, may convince lifestyle practitioners that their civic obligation is has been fulfilled, thereby discouraging the pursuit of more traditional activism (Keuhn, 2009; Mukherjee, 2012).

A prevalent theme in the existing body of research on digital citizenship and lifestyle politics suggests that the Internet offers new promises for realizing something like the Habermasian construct of the public sphere (especially the work of W. Lance Bennett, who has written extensively on the matter). However, this is a dangerous assumption for several reasons. First, the conceptual public sphere (as an inclusive space for critical discussion among equal citizens without regard to socioeconomic class or other identity characteristics) was always highly unlikely to succeed, as systems of inequity based on wealth, gender, and race would necessarily affect any structure created within the culture that fostered them. Furthermore, when public discourse takes place in privately-owned spaces, it is subject to the constant surveillance and eventual co-optation of the corporations that own or control those spaces (Andrejevic, 2009). Finally, the idea that interactivity and “the ability to speak” are inherently empowering or promise liberation must be re-examined; several scholars have already suggested that
interactivity is little more than a way for corporations to coax labor and information out of those who use digital communication platforms (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2014). At best, political expression online could perhaps be likened to a version of Habermas’s “weak sphere,” an informal setting that would allow ideas to circulate and collective identities to emerge, but which would have no strong or institutionalized connection to decision-making bodies (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 73). Such settings are not inconsequential, as they offer space for marginalized groups to “invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations” of hegemonic ideology, but they are unlikely to attain sufficient leverage to hold government or corporate power in check (Fraser, 1992, p. 123).

For practitioners of lifestyle politics, political communication is that which takes place between peers, which challenges our stereotypical “speaking truth-to-power” views of what constitutes anti-establishment political speech. According to Portwood-Stacer (2013), we have to expand those views “to account for the symbolic message that individuals are sending on a daily basis, outside of “official” political institutions (p. 5). In this way, everyday behavior and digitally mediated communication about lifestyle assumes the function and significance of political speech. Through the use of new and networked communication technologies, millennials seek (whether consciously or not) to change the character of politics and bring about a more personal type of political engagement that does not necessarily rely on older or ossified identity structures (Bennett, 1998). Various new communication technologies utilized by domestic bloggers have streamlined peer-to-peer transmission of information about everyday lifestyle practices. Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2013) note that social networking has actually changed the nature of these reflexive discourse practices, opening the possibility of
collaborative identity construction, decentralization of expertise, redefinition of political protest and social struggle, and reclassifying consumption.

**Digital Labor and Interactivity**

Andrejevic (2012) says that the “promise of interactivity functions as an invitation to engage in the work of being watched” (p. 233). This is an updated or expanded version of Smythe’s assertion that watching is work. Then there is the matter of digital interactivity as a source of empowerment. Coleman (2003) argues that in the digital age “[i]nteractivity is political: it shifts control towards the receivers of messages and makes all representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief” (p. 35). Andrejevic (2009) counters that assumption by questioning whether this sort of vulnerability actually amounts to a shift in control; he claims that those who exert social control through mass media are able to “maintain the status quo not by shutting down critique, but by embracing it” (p. 38). Interactive culture demands and relies on our willing participation but it doesn’t care what we have to say (Carah & Louw, 2015, p. 309).

Creating an identity for oneself through interactive participation is an active and reflexive process, but not one that requires reflection (Carah & Louw, 2015, p. 311). Invoking the Foucauldian concept of disciplinary surveillance, Andrejevic (2002) points out that power in this context is neither static nor clearly imposed in a top-down manner. Rather, it works through a “self-stimulating incitement to productivity: the multiplication of desiring subjects and subjects’ desires in accordance with the rationalization of consumption” (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 232). Users are docile, but not inert. They submit to the rules imposed by those who control the means of
production but must do so in an activated way. The fact that interactive culture relies on the exploitation of self-disclosure (wherein users willingly – even enthusiastically – give up personal information and allow behavioral surveillance and tracking) is one reason that it has been difficult for scholars to develop a convincing critique of corporate surveillance (Andrejevic, 2002).

As already discussed, interactive digital media are often seen as a totally new and more democratic model of mass communication (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2010). However, a brief comparison between research about “old” media forms and my own analysis of green domesticity blogs reveals some continuity in terms of content and message despite differences in medium. In her analysis of women’s magazines, Barnett (2006) found that coverage of caretaking labor seemed to focus on tending to “relatively healthy selves, husbands, and children” (p. 8). The work was framed as a “labor of love,” done in service to one’s family (Fox, 1990). This sort of domesticity was portrayed as stressful but ultimately rewarding: a source of fulfillment for women who consciously chose to do it and whose efforts were valued. Green domesticity blogs reinforce that narrative by relaying the experiences of young women who are able-bodied and who care for healthy and active families, and also by rhetorically equating “choice” with “empowerment” (this will be discussed further in Chapter Five). Barnett (2006) goes on to note that magazines did not generally share more difficult stories of caretaking, such as caring for elderly, disabled, or ill family members. This, too, is mirrored in green domesticity blogs that focus on sharing the experiences of “normative” and reasonably affluent nuclear families that do not include older or distant relatives. Occasionally, stories about illnesses are shared (cancer and autism, Nature Mom’s Blog; chronic pain and narcolepsy, Hippy Homemaker), but they are presented as obstacles that have been overcome by individual
perseverance and natural living through adherence to a traditional domestic lifestyle. Although the communicative medium may have evolved, and the strict reliance on “expert” guidance may have loosened, the basic frame remains the same.

Specifically Gendered Neoliberal Expectations

In Kylie Jarrett’s (2014) article about “women’s work” as immaterial labor, she examines a few of the major concepts and surrounding arguments regarding the nature of immaterial labor in informational capitalism. She points out that the work of (mostly) feminist researchers about the gendered specifics of particular types of digital labor has not always – or indeed rarely – factored into research and academic discussions about digital labor; the type of labor that women tend to perform in such settings leans toward the affective, domestic, family-focused, caretaking work that has long been categorized as “women’s work” (and Jarrett provides a caveat about this particular label as problematic, on page 15, where she says that the term is used to “designate the social, reproductive work typically differentiated from the productive economics of the industrial workplace” – this is a designation that has been perpetuated by classic Marxist analysis which separates the domestic sphere and reproductive labor from the “productive” sphere in which wage labor is conducted).

The women whose work is included in this study have made a deliberate choice to visibly reject what they see as the most damaging aspects of mainstream culture (including rampant corporatism and environmentally-destructive consumerism), thereby making an outward signal of commitment to an ostensibly liberal and eco-conscious political ideology. Methods and levels of dedication vary, but the idea of “downshifting” into a “simpler,” more domestic lifestyle seems to have grown increasingly popular and even romanticized in recent years (Hayes, 2010;
Matchar, 2013). This involves returning, in whole or in part, to a mode of living that eschews participation in the competitive corporate workplace, denies the supremacy of consumer convenience through undifferentiated mass-production, and focuses instead on tasks like hands-on parenting, gardening and cooking from scratch, crafting, and other forms of DIY (do-it-yourself) culture. Representative behaviors vary widely in terms of effort and commitment, but they frequently include homeschooling children, sewing or knitting clothing, buying or making non-toxic cleaning and personal care products, organic gardening and shopping at farmer’s markets, and forgoing the financial security of a dual-income marriage in order to have time for these endeavors. For many adherents, this lifestyle symbolizes the reclamation of a more self-sufficient, sustainable, and generally “authentic” existence. But undeniably, the domestic lifestyle is one which has consistently been associated with nostalgia for an era in which clearly-delineated gender roles were the norm.

According to Banet-Weiser (2012), nostalgia “represents a longing for a time (which likely never existed) when it was easier and simpler to decipher a constantly changing world” (p. 128). On one hand, these nostalgic endeavors do involve a backward-facing and at times revisionist process of selection wherein some cultural memories (domestic and homesteading skills to facilitate self-sufficiency) are valorized and deemed worthy of preservation while other cultural memories (especially regarding the social restriction and disenfranchisement that many American women felt when they were largely relegated to the home sphere) remain mostly unacknowledged or are even denied. On the other hand, such endeavors also represent an opportunity for practitioners of the green domestic lifestyle to look ahead toward creating a change in the direction of a society characterized by economic inequality, partisan political quagmire, and environmentally destructive consumption. At least ostensibly, the bloggers aim to
use “downshifted” lifestyle choices to reject (whether explicitly or implicitly) many problematic features of the neoliberal social ethos that has been a defining feature of their culture since birth.

This particular sort of eco-aware domestic lifestyle has been called a few different things. Movement pioneer Shannon Hayes (in a 2010 book that shows on its cover a clean-faced woman holding a rolling pin aloft against a blue-sky backdrop) calls it Radical Homemaking, which she describes as a “vocation for saving family, community, and the planet” (p. 1). Emily Matchar (2013) calls it the New Domesticity, based on the “collective nostalgia and domesticity-mania” which “speak to deep cultural longings and a profound shift in the way Americans view life” in the early 21st century (p. 4). Other functional labels include “voluntary simplicity,” “downshifting,” or “slow living.” Seeing this choice as an empowering act of rebellion against mainstream society, they use digital spaces to document their reclamation of domestic know-how (Matchar, 2013). Women who embrace this type of nostalgic, green domesticity see it as an opportunity to proactively and individually overcome anxiety related to health threats – both psychological and physical – and environmental degradation. But the ramifications of their choices extend beyond individuals or family unites; there is a complicated dialectical relationship between this type of green domestic lifestyle and neoliberalism as the predominant social influence in the U.S. today.

**Postfeminism and the neoliberal subject**

In 2003, the *New York Times Magazine* published a lengthy and much-discussed article (“The opt-out revolution”) about a group of educated and professionally successful women who decided to leave their high-powered careers behind and dedicate themselves to motherhood and
housewifery. Many of the “opt-out” mothers justified their rejection of the workplace on biological grounds, saying that (as women) they were born to enjoy less competitive work and more stereotypically feminine roles, which they found by embracing full-time domesticity (Belkin, 2003). These Generation X feminists said that making the choice to stay home was empowering, not because of any inherent problems with the corporate/capitalist work world or their ability to succeed in it, but rather because they had the resources and opportunity (through pregnancy and motherhood) to do so. Ten years later, many of the women from the original article reported that they had become bored, frustrated, and isolated after a few years at home. One former lawyer explained that her corporate job had given her confidence in herself and her ability to succeed, but that confidence waned once she left the career track (Warner, 2013).

Today, fifteen years after the “opt-out” phenomenon was first given a name, a subset of millennial women have also begun to reject the idea of competitive corporate careers. Like the original group, they are educated (in fact, millennial women tend to be more educated than their male counterparts), relatively affluent, and liberal. However, when surveyed, this new group expresses a pointed critique of employment in corporate America that was not part of the Gen-X opt-out narrative. Fifty-eight percent of millennial women say that being a parent makes it harder for them to advance in a career (rather than describing parenthood as a woman’s opportunity to withdraw) and 34% say that they are uninterested in climbing “the ladder” to hold an upper-level or management position (Pew Research Center, 2013). They also tend to believe that the workplace “playing field” is not level between genders, a belief that was not expressed by the Gen-X interviewees in Belkin’s 2003 article nor uncovered in Stone’s (2007) work with women who opted out in the early 2000s. And perhaps most surprisingly, according to a recent survey conducted by the Working Mother Research Institute, 60% of millennial women say that one
parent *should* stay home with their children, compared with only 50% of Gen-X women (Bowers, 2014).

Instead of seeking to escape from a system that they found equitable but unfulfilling, young women who choose the path of domesticity express a desire to make the (their) world better by deliberately returning to a less rushed, more natural, and mentally or physically healthy way of living. In her book *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity*, Emily Matchar (2013) writes that women in her generation, currently in their twenties and thirties, are disillusioned with their parents’ careerism and are “longing for a more authentic, meaningful life in an economically and environmentally uncertain world” (p. 5). They try to address this situation by reclaiming the skills and traditions that many of them associate with their grandmothers’ generation. In doing so they have, perhaps unconsciously, updated these behaviors in a way that both reflects the pervasive neoliberal ethos and addresses modern anxieties related to political uncertainty and environmental threats.

The word *domesticity* connotes the nuclear family home and the private-sphere activities that take place there: parenthood, intimate relationships, and care-taking labor. Despite trends toward gender equity, domestic labor is often still the domain of women. For instance, a 2015 U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS] report found that among parents, women spend over twice as much time per day providing direct care to their children than their male partners; women were also twice as likely to do daily household chores as their male partners (who were, in turn, more likely to work longer hours outside the home and to engage in daily leisure activities). Even for women who have chosen to dedicate their efforts exclusively to domesticity or housewifery, the lingering imbalance in household labor is problematic. Even younger women who willingly and deliberately pursue green domesticity may face the implicit
assumption that domesticity is “separate from, and often inferior to, the worlds of work and men and that they operate at scales of the home and body rather than those of the nation and globe” (Dowling & Power, 2013, p. 290). Paradoxically, this stigma is perpetuated by the argument that women should, for their own liberation and satisfaction, be discouraged from pursuing (exclusively) domestic lives and encouraged to move into the “productive” workforce (as evidenced by the popularity of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s “lean in” advice, or Hillary Clinton’s much-discussed disavowal of cookie-baking and tea-hosting); the repetition of such messages ultimately has a deleterious effect on the way we evaluate domesticity as a legitimate or worthwhile occupation. But if this work is still generally undervalued, why has reclaiming it become such a meaningful endeavor?

During the early- and mid-20th century, a growing reliance on consumer goods like processed food and cheaply-produced garments effectively de-skilled many of the women who had been in charge of household domestic labor. New commodities, technologies, and a focus on efficiency (modeled after industrial production) replaced skilled but time-consuming domestic work with mechanized and expensive appliances (Cowan, 1983; Fox, 1990). The accompanying narrative of convenience over all else (which is in many ways still dominant today) is often rejected in green domesticity, replaced by a growing awareness that fast-food and fast-fashion and cheap consumer gadgets do not always make life easier and more comfortable (Slack & Wise, 2005). Moreover, the intense level of consumerism that has in recent decades been the norm has taken a serious toll on the natural environment (Jhally, 2006; Schor, 2010). Activities like home canning, sock-darning, or making eco-friendly cleaning supplies, which had been associated with poverty or thrift, have instead come to symbolize an enlightened political attitude about consumption and the environment (Matchar, 2013, p. 45).
The reward for all this hard work is difficult to quantify, but advocates list happiness and a greater sense of peace, less environmental degradation, more time to spend with children and partners, and the satisfaction that comes from “doing your part” as benefits. And interestingly, young women who practice green domesticity commonly express the belief that pursing this labor-intensive lifestyle, which is based on what they see as a more traditional or “authentic” mode of living, is an empowering – and therefore, feminist – act of rebellion against corporate culture. Emancipatory rhetoric aside, the connection between millennial domesticity and the feminist movement is neither direct nor without tension. That the commercialization of the feminized private sphere and the corresponding rise of the “convenience” discourse undercut traditional domestic knowledge and was a source of increasing unhappiness and dissatisfaction for many women during the mid-20th century is accepted by a large number of historians and cultural critics, but its lasting effect – and what should be done in response – is the subject of some disagreement. Second-wave feminist pioneer Betty Friedan (1963) saw it contributing to the rising feelings of frustration and emptiness she identified in 1960s housewives and suggested that emancipation from domestic life was the solution. This soon became a central concern for mid-20th century feminist activists, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s helped many women transition into the workforce and find positions of relative liberation. However, this older generation of feminist activists have since been critiqued on several grounds. Of particular relevance is the critical stance many young feminists take toward the second-wave strategy of framing women’s needs as universal, thereby homogenizing the experiences of women, denying the diversity of womanhood and re-marginalizing both poor women and women of color, and unintentionally creating new limits on their autonomy by devaluing domestic or caretaking labor (Bulbeck, 2010).
Today, in what is sometimes referred to as the third-wave era of feminism (but which has also been identified as a problematic phase of postfeminist backlash) some women have come to feel that the mid-century migration into the “productive” capitalist workforce was not a universally appropriate response to feeling alienated from traditional housekeeping labor. Second-wave feminists singled out the housewife figure, and women in that role came to represent anti-feminism or “the epitome of female non-identity and passivity, a perfect illustration of patriarchal constructions of Woman as an apathetic, dependent, and purposeless being” (Genz, 2008, p. 51). Now, facing the legacy of a dogmatic narrative that not only devalues domestic knowledge and skill but also denies the agency of a woman who chooses to pursue domesticity as a primary vocation, some millennial homemakers feel that by regaining traditional knowledge and participating in alternative economies they are actively pushing back against entrenched neoliberalism and commodification by (Hayes, 2010; Matchar, 2013). Yet in many cases, lifestyle politics and the “technologies of self” tactics they advocate actually reify the hegemonic status of consumerism in the domestic sphere. Kuperberg and Stone (2008) even suggest that the “rhetoric of choice” surrounding motherhood and domestication – whether espoused by Gen-Xers or millennials – could “be interpreted as signaling the emergence of a new feminine mystique, an updated version of what Betty Friedan first identified in 1963” (p. 512).

It should be noted that this throwback domesticity phenomenon actually predated the flurry of early-2000s media attention. Noticing the phenomenon well before it came to the millennial generation, Susan Faludi (1991) suggested that the renewed interest in traditional domestic craft and housewifery was the result of a “conservative backlash” against women’s migration into the workplace. I would argue that, although it is bound to the idea of feminine
domesticity, the present nostalgia is more likely a manifestation of the younger generation’s anxiety about the current cultural and political climate than a direct result of the 1970s- and 1980s-era backlash identified by Faludi (1991). During periods of uncertainty and national crisis (economic downturns, political upheaval, times of war), we often see a heightened preoccupation with fortify and preserving “the family” as a productive, independent, and stable unit (Fox, 1990; Ogden, 1986). As Horton argues, millennial practices or performances of nostalgic domesticity may or may not be accompanied by an explicit or “correct espousal” of this political tension and anxiety, but its coherence as lifestyle politics is not necessarily diminished if such an espousal is not made evident. However, the ultimate political efficacy of such engagement in neoliberal society is debatable.

The desire to gather and archive knowledge about domestic skills – knowledge that seems diminished among recent generations – is at least partially based on a desire to create a link with past generations. But the nostalgia for a past era that is seen as being more authentic is predicated on an idealized memory of a time that likely never existed, at least not as it has come to be remembered (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lizardi, 2014). For some women, reclaiming domesticity may seem like a way to neutralize modern threats through individual self-reliance, but sociologist Sharon Zukin (2008) suggests that reaching toward perceived authenticity merely provides a sort of “psychic consolation” for members of society who lack real opportunity to effect changes in power structures. In this way, contemporary domestic nostalgia and the longing for “authenticity” does tell us something important about politics; according to Banet-Weiser (2012), “nostalgia often becomes a normative trope in political discourse as a way to mask or cope with anxiety about change,” and in many ways it is a “close cousin to fear” (p. 128).
Critical consideration of the green domestic movement, and its shifting definitions of feminine empowerment, must account for its current cultural context; namely, the “retreat of the welfare state and the growing hegemony of neoliberalism” (Bulbeck, 2010, p. 22). In other words, although the lifestyle is ostensibly predicated on a rejection of corporatism, the movement itself is a product of neoliberal society; its practitioners have likewise grown up steeped in neoliberal ideology. The internalization of individualism and responsibilization is understandably hard to avoid in a culture where those values are so thoroughly pervasive. To make this argument is not an attempt to rhetorically diminish the agency of women who choose to engage in environmental lifestyle strategies, although some interpret it as such (see Shannon Hayes’s 2010 book, Radical Homemakers). However, it is to suggest that their agency is impeded by forces in neoliberal consumer culture which re-commodify the work that they do to oppose it.

This commodification results from the convergence of two types of labor: first, the unwaged affective labor that is valorized by green domesticity discourse; and second, the immaterial labor that bloggers invest in creating and maintaining digital spaces in which the green domesticity networked public is situated. These have already been discussed individually and at length in previous sections, but their combination creates a different category of labor that generates collective knowledge. The lifestyle experts who mass-distribute advice and information about wellness and green domesticity, along with readers who organize their material lives in line with that guidance, are performing what Fuchs (2010) calls “knowledge labor”: the production and distribution of media content and information about social relationships, housework, “common knowledge,” natural resources, and caretaking. The first group are direct knowledge workers whose expertise is commodified as media texts – like books...
and monetized blogs – but also as products that are appropriately “de-fetishized” and sold in specific and exclusive social spaces like farmers’ markets and craft markets. The second, who produce and reproduce the social conditions that allow specific environmental lifestyles to have meaning and flourish, are indirect knowledge workers (Fuchs, 2010, p. 141). While the former are paid for their labor and the latter are not (in the traditional sense), both are exploited in neoliberal capitalism. The manner of this exploitation is that corporations capitalize on the information and the demand generated by the collective work of these individuals (who are, essentially, creating a market for products that showcase their connection to environmentalist imperatives but also to issues like social justice, fair labor and trade, and health concerns). Thus, to put it in rather blunt and simplified Marxian terms, those who own the means of production are still capitalizing on the effort of undercompensated laborers. And even though the intentions of neoliberal citizens who engage in the construction and maintenance of environmental lifestyles may be purely based on a desire to do good (which is likely the case for many, but not all), their activity is exploited and its revolutionary potential is blunted within the context of neoliberalism.

The ability of mass media to shape public knowledge about health and other personally-relevant social issues has long been assumed. Studies of traditional (i.e., not digital or internet-based) mass media have found that women’s media texts, such as magazines, have had a significant hand in bringing health-related information to the attention of general audiences and even in improving women’s health (Barnett, 2006, p.2). Although the information presented in “old media” texts was designed to be accessible and understandable for general audiences, it relied on the input and trusted expertise of trained professionals. New media forms, including the green domesticity blogs in this study, do not necessarily follow this expert advice model. The
assumed “democratizing” effect of Web 2.0 interactivity has opened spaces for a multiplicity of voices to speak on a staggeringly wide array of issues. In their digital spaces, the authors and audiences come together to form what Lauren Berlant calls an “intimate public”; they create networked communities held together by the expectation that others “within a given intimate public share a worldview and an emotional connection that is bound together by a common [social] experience” along with a sense of authenticity and history (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 218).

Frequently, green domesticity bloggers are women speaking to an audience of other women, and in most cases they consider themselves to be environmentalists as well as feminists (here we must remember that there are many different ideas about what makes one a feminist, just as there are many different and sometimes conflicting ideas about what makes one an environmentalist). But the messages that they disseminate may re-create rather than resist the oppressive discursive connection between environmentalism, caretaking, and gender by only taking into account one type of (educated, affluent) lived experience. Historian Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983) argues that the pressure women feel to meet the expectations of their lifestyle groups or intimate publics comes from two directions; it is the result of efforts by corporations and advertisers seeking to manipulate behavior, but it also comes from social influence at the peer level. If women do in fact have such a tendency to affect the behavior of other women, either advertently or inadvertently, Foucault’s argument about conduct of conduct is particularly salient in this area of inquiry.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In Chapter One, I indicated that my research would be situated within the interdisciplinary research movement of critical discourse analysis (CDA). After an overview of critical studies as a scholarly orientation, and the particular critical frameworks that structure my work, this chapter describes CDA in greater detail. I then outline the process of evidence-gathering that I used to examine specific textual elements and identify key themes and commonalities between blogs. Finally, following a discussion of how this set of green domesticity blogs was selected, the chapter will end with some basic descriptive information about the blogs and bloggers.

The Critical Approach

Critical theory (which is strongly informed by the critical cultural work of the Frankfurt School, as well as some articulations of Marxism or neo-Marxism) is inherently political, characterized by a commitment to social justice, a critique of cultural domination and exploitation, and based anti-neoliberal sentiment. Critical theorists are concerned with uncovering the existence and foundations of unequal social relations and power imbalances and use their scholarship to advance the goal of achieving social equity, arguing that a “better future without domination and exploitation” is possible (Fuchs, 2018, p. 15; Lewis, 2009; McKee, 2001). They reject the strict empiricism, mechanistic ontology, and objectivist epistemology of positivism, recognizing that researchers are not objective observers and the knowledge they produce in their work is not value-free (Fuchs, 2017). Lazar (2007) asserts that critical analysis should not merely be “academic de-construction of texts and talk for its own sake”; instead, the
research should foster understanding about issues of focus that have “material and phenomenological consequences for groups of men and women in specific communities” (p. 142).

Media studies scholarship in the critical tradition often starts with the assumption that “media culture provides the materials for constructing views of the world, behavior, and even identities,” and therefore the practices and texts that make up media culture should be subjected to careful critique (Kellner, 2015, p. 8). We recognize that dominant “voices” in mass media work “to amplify or at least normalize” neoliberal and other hegemonic values, embedding those values “ever more deeply within contemporary cultures of governance,” which constrains identity formation and problematically redefines democratic citizenship (Couldry, 2010, p. 73; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). To counter this process, Banet-Weiser and Gray (2009) suggest that critical media studies should focus on “shifting forms and structures of power” and inclusion of diverse identities “in the service of social justice” (p. 18).

Another foundational assumption, one which has occasionally (although not by necessity) been positioned at odds with the first, is that, from a political-economic point of view, audiences are significant primarily in their ability to be commodified and sold as a product to advertisers (Fuchs, 2017). This audience commodity has become more active and thus easier to recognize in digital media, where user-generated content, online community building, and gathering of data clearly contribute to the profit structures of corporate service providers. While Dallas Smythe, in his original articulation of the audience commodity concept, said that audiences were doing work by watching or otherwise consuming media – which Jhally and Livant (1986) called “watching as working” – Anderejevic (2002) suggests that today we should update the label to reflect that what audiences are actually doing is the “work of being watched.”
These two positions, of the media as a delivery system for ideology in dominant social structures like capitalism and patriarchy, and of the media as an institution that commodifies its audience in a specific political-economic structure, are not mutually exclusive and both are conceptually significant in this dissertation.

Writing about the normative function of critical media studies, Lewis (2009) argues that work in this area should be based primarily upon interest in uncovering or understanding the mechanisms of identity formation, political structures and values, and the function of power in society, rather than upon personal interest in any particular text or medium. Such an approach, he explains, “has media as its subject but not at its center,” and a researcher chooses to focus on media as a site of analysis because she recognizes its significance as an instrument of hegemonic social power (Lewis, 2009, p. 91). With that in mind, I designed this project to be an investigation of how identity formation, based on lifestyle decisions and facilitated by “expert” guidance, exists in a dialectical relationship with hegemonic ideologies about neoliberal citizenship. Within the context of this relationship, identity, labor, and citizenship are each commodified. This investigation is based on analysis of structural elements and constitutive discourse in a selection of green domesticity blogs. Within these texts, the flexible and ongoing construction of identity is guided by “lifestyle influencer” figures; through their content and social media branding, they relay information and offer advice not just about “correct” lifestyle choices, but also about appropriate citizen-consumer behavior. While the narrative frames and themes I have found in this collection of green domesticity blogs are not necessarily generalizable to the entire category of lifestyle blogs, my analysis does add to current research on other blog-types within that category by purposefully focusing on the political elements of green domestic blog content. Other relevant findings, particularly relating to the nature of immaterial
labor and self-branding in a postfeminist media culture, lend support to the conclusions of researchers doing similar work on identity and neoliberal ideology in gendered digital spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2015a, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2011; Jarrett, 2014; Matchar, 2013; Ouellette & Wilson, 2011; Titton, 2015).

Critical Theoretical Frameworks: Political Economy and Feminist Theory

Critical theory is neither monolithic nor even a homogenous set of principles. Rather, several theoretical frameworks exist within the critical aegis, with distinct foci but often overlapping areas of concern. These critical frameworks (feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, political economy, etc.) are at least loosely based on “critique” in the Marxist sense, so they share a common goal: to identify and challenge the institutions and groups that comprise hegemonic power structures in order to actively support the recognition and improvement of marginalized groups’ lived experiences within a society. This foundation in Marxist critique has variable degrees of influence on different theoretical lenses, but in general it facilitates materialist analyses of class divisions and systems of oppression in capitalist societies (Steeves & Wasko, 2002).

Kellner (2015) suggests that critical media studies should be informed by multiple theoretical lenses in order to avoid potential “blind spots” or reductive conclusions (p. 12). With that in mind, this dissertation combines political economy and feminist theory, which are each suited to address particular aspects of my research questions. To consider the issues of structure (RQ1), labor (RQ2a), and commodification (all, but especially RQ4), I employed a political economic framework. With strong ties to the work of Marx (particularly here his theories of estranged labor, exploitation, and commodity fetishism) as well the Frankfurt School (as
discussed in Chapter Two, this was a loose affiliation of scholars who sought to fill in what they considered gaps in orthodox Marxism by using theory borrowed from other disciplines and incorporating a focus on hegemonic ideology as an instrument of power), political economy is a macro-level analytic lens that examines how power structures influence the formation and dissemination of information (among other commodities) in capitalist society (Mosco, 2009). Therefore, research in this category “stress[es] the importance of analyzing cultural texts within their system of production and distribution” (Kellner, 2015, p. 10). While the term “cultural studies” is occasionally used to refer to a slightly different type of media scholarship, I will occasionally use the term “critical cultural studies” when discussing political economic analysis that looks more closely at ideological forces rather than industrial structures.

As new media become increasingly dominant, the distinction between creation and consumption (i.e., production and distribution) of media content has become less defined, which is part of a process that Jenkins (2006) calls convergence culture. A handful of scholars (notably the especially prolific but occasionally strident Christian Fuchs) have addressed this convergence and its associated challenges by extending the principles of political economy into the realm of online communication and digital content creation. Critical internet studies attends to the ways that the Internet both shapes and is shaped by neoliberalism, along with the effects of corporatization and commodification on digital communities and their creative expression (Andrejevic, 2002, 2011, 2012; Cohen, 2012; Fuchs, 2010, 2012, 2014; Lessig, 2012; McChesney, 2013; Rushkoff, 2016; Scholz, 2008; Vaidyanathan, 2018). This offshoot of political economy will be considered in more detail later in the chapter.

Media analysis structured by feminist theory was best suited to explore issues of identity construction (especially, but not exclusively, RQ2 and RQ2a), for two primary reasons: first, the
texts I analyzed were almost exclusively created by women and focused on activities that have long been coded as “feminine,” a characteristic that I wished to foreground in my work; second, feminist research is generally intersectional, and extends beyond merely considering gender to address the experiences of other marginalized groups as well. Just as there is no singular definition of “feminism,” there is no agreed-upon set of criteria for marking out a cohesive body of feminist research, or a group of traits that identify feminist researchers (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Harding, 1987; Potter, 1996). In general, however, critique based on feminist theory foregrounds the political goal of identifying repressive hegemonic social structures in order to dismantle them (Gallagher, 2003). Feminist critique of media texts – and the representations and discourses that they contain – seeks to understand how they are shaped by patriarchal, classist, heteronormative, and racist ideologies; furthermore, such critique looks for ways to challenge those problematic worldviews.

I feel comfortable describing my research as feminist based on several characteristics. First, my work in this dissertation is founded on the view that women’s lived experiences are a valid subject of study and that “unearthing women’s subjugated knowledge” is a crucial goal (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 4). Women have been systematically subordinated by patriarchal social forces, underrepresented politically, and constructed as objects – rather than active subjects – of knowledge (Gallagher, 2007). Non-male, non-white, non-straight identities are, even in academic work, systematically classified as “other,” resulting in a persistent withholding of privilege and an assumption that their “concerns” are part of a distinct and separate category of work, a pattern which I hope to counter in this dissertation. One way to achieve that goal is to focus on collecting data or evidence in ways that deliberately “foreground women’s personal experiences,” so that researchers are able to “uncover sites of cultural
resistance and contestation” (Duffy, 2015b, p. 712). Such sites, occasionally referred to as “counterpublics” or “networked publics” – concepts which I explore below – foster or at least create space for discussion that may contradict hegemonic ideology (Duffy, 2015b). To the best of my ability, I have also tried to maintain a degree of self-reflexivity throughout this dissertation, which is a central commitment of feminist research but also represents the belief within critical theory that scholarship are not value-free.

**Self-reflexivity**

No matter the discipline or subject matter, one prominent hallmark of feminist research is a commitment to self-reflexivity, requiring the researcher to maintain awareness of the circular relationship between self and subject. Generated by the ongoing practice of “checking in,” this awareness exposes the asymmetrical balance of power throughout the entire research process. A feminist scholar must always be attentive to the ways in which the “structural, political, and cultural environments of the researcher, the participants, and the nature of the study affect the research process and product” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p. 496). Rather than “an invisible, anonymous voice of authority,” by taking a feminist perspective I am directed to situate myself “in the same critical plane as [my] subject matter” (Harding, 1987, p. 9). The purpose of making myself a visible figure is to account for, or at least acknowledge the presence of, any assumptions – whether obvious or implicit – about race, class, and gender that may affect my analysis. But rather than seeing one’s subjectivity as a limitation, as positivist research tends to do, Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007) suggest that “[the feminist] researcher is encouraged to openly acknowledge, and even to draw from, her situated perspective in the course of her
research project,” implying that accounting for subjectivity via self-reflection is an additional resource that can add depth to one’s work (p. 15).

My interest in critical media studies began to take shape during the last year of my master’s coursework in the political science department at Colorado State University, a major that valued sustainability, critical theory, and political economy. In my final term, as I began to turn my attention toward articulating a thesis topic, I took two classes in the Communication Studies department. These extended and in some ways challenged the theoretical foundation I had acquired as a student of political science; ultimately, I found that the political issues that were meaningful to me could be studied through mass media and popular culture. As a doctoral student at Penn State I maintained my interests in critical theory (particularly political economy, which I grew to enjoy even more in the heavily commodified context of mass communication), and environmental policy. My interest in the digital humanities, particularly the circular relationship between culture and technology, grew over time but was solidified when, during a course that focused exclusively on that interaction, I learned about the various ways that women have been – and continue to be – erased from the commonly-accepted narrative about technological development.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2011) describe theory as a “methodological bridge” that connects a researcher’s epistemology and their practical methods. Political economy, critical cultural studies, and feminist theory do not themselves mandate any particular analytic methods, but they guide researchers toward relevant topics which are then studied using appropriate data-gathering techniques (Stokes, 2003). Critical discourse analysis is an approach to the process of
research which can help structure that connection between theory, topic, and technique (Van Dijk, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak (2009) say that CDA is an interdisciplinary research movement, characterized by “a shared interest in the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society” (p. 357).

CDA examines the relationship between discourse, structure, and social control; within and across texts, discourse is seen as a site of power and meaning-making. Research in this category seeks to explain – rather than just describe – the various discursive elements of a text in terms of how they represent and constitute social interactions and social structures (van Dijk, 2001). Here again, no specific data-gathering techniques are dictated as long as this explanatory goal is met, but methods will generally “involve some sort of close textual (and/or multi-modal) analysis” (Fairclough et al., 2009, p. 359; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This project works toward that end by subjecting the blogs to a close reading, guided by the principles of political economy and feminist theory.

My objective, as stated above, was to explain how green domesticity blogs link identity to choices about lifestyle, a process that is directed by the advice of “lifestyle influencers” and which ultimately has the effect of reinforcing the hegemonic model of neoliberal citizenship. From a subjective epistemological standpoint, no single or “correct” explanation exists, but CDA guides researchers toward likely interpretations by using critical theory (in this case, political economy and feminism) to inform and refine decisions about how to approach the text and pinpoint features that correspond to the research questions (Fairclough et al., 2009). The following features are included in my analysis: (1) common elements of digital structure; (2) reoccurring discourses located in both language and images; which were then considered (3)
collectively as patterns of commodification. A more detailed account of this process can be found later in the chapter.

Discourse

In critical qualitative textual analysis, the word *discourse* may refer broadly to “the vast array of meaning-making resources available to us,” but it is also commonly employed in a narrower sense to describe “a category for identifying particular ways of representing some aspect of social life” (Fairclough et al., 2009, p. 357). By either definition, discourse is a form of dialectical social practice: the “discursive event”\(^3\) is shaped by situations, textual conventions, and social structures but it is likewise able to shape them in return. Put another way, discourse is socially constructed but also constitutive in the sense that it helps to sustain the social status quo, but under certain conditions can also contribute to challenging or changing it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). When conducting textual analysis, though, discourse also must be considered as a part of the text. In order to facilitate that consideration and generate continuity between texts that are structurally complex, specific textual elements are identified. These may include images, phrases, words, or structural elements; a more detailed description of how this dissertation identifies and analyzes textual elements appears in the chapter.

Discourse validates specific social structures like education, law, medicine, and politics; within those structures, discursive patterns and recurring themes become the accepted language, through which meaning is made (Carah & Louw, 2015). Active control over discourse is not evenly distributed among all people; instead, members of more powerful social groups have a greater ability to influence discourse formation (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 356). In fact, while their power originates from various social privileges like financial resources or education, ability to

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\(^3\) Fairclough (1992) calls any instance or moment of discourse a discursive event and argues that such events are parts of texts but also, because of their ability to affect cultural perception they are a social practice (p. 4).
control discourse and normalize the hegemonic status quo, what Antonio Gramsci (1971) called “social hegemony,” is a central instrument through which power is maintained. One way this dominance is achieved is by defining and valorizing particular forms of expertise, which traditionally required the expert-figure be reliably credentialed (Nichols, 2017). For example, lawyers with Juris Doctor degrees maintain their power by controlling legal discourse, and doctors and psychiatrists who hold medical degrees legitimize their power by defining mental and physical illness (Foucault, 1969/1972).

**Feminist critical discourse analysis as interpretive axiology**

As an extension of CDA, feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is by necessity an interdisciplinary approach to media studies, because gender identity is intersectional and does not exist apart from other categories of social identity. The explicit goals of FCDA scholarship are to reveal gender as a hegemonic and divisive ideology, critique discourses that “sustain a patriarchal social order,” and “disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). While the language of wellness and the sphere of green domesticity blogs are filled with messages about feminine empowerment through choice, these messages call for closer scrutiny. Their claims should not be accepted uncritically, especially because they tend to be articulated in postfeminist terms and tied to a romanticized – and in some cases quite distorted – nostalgia for a bygone era in U.S. culture that second wave feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem had fought to dismantle. Feminist reading of the discourses in these web spaces is well-suited to guide inquiry about the re-creation of traditional – and frequently gendered –

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4 The concept is most often referred to as “cultural hegemony,” and I will use that term going forward. However, in most translations of the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci himself uses the term “social hegemony,” which he describes as the “consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamnet group,” as opposed to a disciplinary “apparatus of state coercive power” (from Hoare & Smith’s 1971 translation of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*).
dichotomies like the split between the public and private spheres, individual and collective good(s), and the masculine-feminine divide (Wodak & Busch, 2004).

As is the case with all feminist research, self-reflexivity and the practice of “checking in” are valued in FCDA. Fundamentally, this type of scholarship recognizes that the relationship between discourse, power, and social inequality is influenced by heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies; another crucial recognition is that the researcher is also positioned within that relational web (Van Dijk, 1993). This interpretive axiological commitment calls for recognition of my own subjectivity and consideration of the connection between myself and my study (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Earlier in the chapter, I provided some information about my identity as a researcher; here I will share some thoughts about how I find myself relating to the object of my analysis: green domesticity blogs.

As a woman who was raised in a feminist environment (although perhaps it was not always referred to as “feminism,” the views about gender that I learned from my two mother figures certainly shaped that part of my identity), I have a complicated relationship with domesticity. Despite the postfeminist rhetoric of choice as empowerment, I see the gendered expectations that are still culturally attached to stay-at-home parenting and activities like cooking and crafting as problematic. My critical orientation toward commodification and consumer-based models of citizenship make me fully aware of the manipulative nature of the wellness industry, the commodification of immaterial labor and personal data, and the reinforcement of feminine embodiment in many of the blogs I have analyzed.

Andy yet: I admit that I have enjoyed perusing sites such as Goop, which eventually led me to the set of texts that eventually became the topic of my dissertation. I find them to be a pleasant distraction and a way to envision lifestyles that are much different from my own. But
justifying the amount of time I have spent clicking through online wellness shops (water bottle
with a crystal inside! Aromatherapy dog collar!), bookmarking vegan zucchini bread recipes, and
assembling a list of “do it yourself” clay face masks (which I will almost certainly not do myself)
is not the motivation for this research. I believe that the more problematic aspects of green
domesticity blogs, notably their emphasis on individualization and consumption-focused lifestyle
politics, undermine the gains of feminism, sustain or even exacerbate the inequality between
ethnicity- and class-based social groups, and ultimately reify the dominance of the neoliberal
social ethos.

Research Methods and Data Collection

Qualitative textual analysis is not a singular research method; rather, it is a process of
evidence-gathering and analysis making use of one or more “close reading” techniques (McKee,
2001). Textual analysis involves identifying ideological messages – both explicit and implied –
that are embedded in a text or set of texts, and which are then analyzed in relation to the social
systems and hegemonic ideologies in which they are situated. Texts are polysemous and
audiences are diverse, so there is no way to identify one “correct” interpretation or determine
whether a text is an “accurate” representation of reality (Kellner, 2015). But if we accept the idea
that meaning is made within discourse (or the Foucauldian assertion that knowledge itself is
created through discourse), and that cultural elites have more ability to shape discourse, then it is
important to understand how audiences make sense of the world through media texts (McKee,
2001). Although no one group has absolute power over discourse; it is nevertheless
simultaneously shaped by and constitutive of the social status quo (Carah & Louw, 2015).
Meaning-making is a dialectic negotiation between media producers and media consumers (even
considering the power imbalance between the two groups), so research that deconstructs themes and ideological messages within texts is a productive form of critique as long as their cultural context is taken into account (Fairclough et al., 2009; Wodak & Busch, 2004).

Traditional methods of textual data collection and analysis are not immediately transferrable to the study of digital spaces, because their multi-modality and the lack of absolute clarity regarding their “edges” due to the nature of digital architecture (hyperlinks, widgets that actively motivate the user to keep clicking and moving “forward”) present new challenges. This study also makes use of principles associated with political economy by taking into account the systems of production and distribution that affect and constrain these digital networks (Andrejevic, 2009; Kellner, 2015). Therefore, textual analysis is combined with considerations of power structures, corporate control of media platforms, and the processes of commodification through which value is generated. To clarify these ideas before describing specific data-gathering techniques, the next two sections elaborate on the nature of digital texts and briefly explore how critical theory fits into their analysis.

Defining and delineating the digital text

Miller (2011) suggests that we reached a point of “peak blog” around 2004 or 2005. In the late 1990s, net-based software made it easier for average internet users to create their own “web-logs,” which at the time were mostly compilations of thematic, regularly updated posts and hyperlinks. But around the same time, a new digital age was taking over: the interactive era of Web 2.0. This term, which refers to the evolution of the World Wide Web from a collection of static pages and one-way browser-based applications into a more active space characterized by tools and ‘participatory architectures’ that facilitate user-generated content and interactivity, was
first used in 1999 by information architect Darcy DiNucci (Scholz, 2008). Writing in *Print Magazine*, she accurately predicted that the Internet would become a dynamic content “transport mechanism” that would appear not only on computer screens but also handheld devices, TV sets, car dashboards, and “maybe even your microwave” (DiNucci, 1999). The label made its way into the popular lexicon following the first Web 2.0 Conference, hosted by digital media pioneer Tim O’Reilly in 2004 (Birdsall, 2007).

It has become relatively common to use the term Web 2.0 when talking about the collective universe of social media, but interactivity encompasses more than those platforms; essentially, Web 2.0 is an evolution in the “socio-technical relationship between the user of media and the media itself,” wherein the user is invited to have some sort of influence over the media or to offer feedback upon it (Miller, 2011, p. 16). Direct sharing of information and other content between people, whether through social networks or microblogging platforms (i.e., Twitter), is also a significant development, one that allows citizens to make direct contact with more multiple others without having to rely on or challenge the “bottleneck” of traditional media institutions (Fuchs, 2017). This evolution has been lauded by some internet scholars as a positive step toward more participation or even expanded opportunities for political expression and activism (Bennett, 1998, 2012; Bennet, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, & Seltzer, 2011). However, the discourse around the “newness” of social media and its interactive capacities is primarily aimed at investors and advertisers, which indicates that Web 2.0 might more accurately be described as a marketing strategy (Scholz, 2008). Jenkins and Ford (2013), who at times seem determined to straddle the fence between these two positions, say that the concept of Web 2.0 is less a temporal era than an ongoing process, simultaneously a “reorganization of the relations between producers and their audiences” and the adoption of a set
of tactics “by companies seeking to harness mass creativity, collectivism, and peer production” (p. 49).

**Digital networks and networked publics**

These coinciding phenomena – the peak of personal blogging and the rise of Web 2.0 and social media – affected the shape and substance of online user generated content. Social media networks, from Friendster (2001) to MySpace (2002) to Facebook (2004), made use of the new interactive capabilities of the World Wide Web. Their rapid growth in popularity diminished the prevalence of personal blogs but blogging as a practice did not go away. Rather, bloggers saw new opportunities to link their pages and social media profiles, creating personal digital networks (which quickly began to take on the function and aesthetics of a brand). Each connected social media profile became both a paratext (shaping audience interpretation of authors’ original posts and, through that content, their identity) and a synergistic opportunity to promote an author’s
blog entries (and frequently, the products they endorse in those entries) by cross-posting content on multiple platforms (see Figure 1). The hybridized, interactive digital space surrounding one blog, composed of interconnected social media profiles and occasionally digital storefronts (either native to the blog site or located on Etsy), forms a digital network. Considered collectively, a constellation of similar digital networks constitutes what boyd (2011) calls a “networked public” (p. 41). This concept exists somewhere between the idealized (and masculinized) Habermasian public sphere and Fraser’s (1990) “subaltern counterpublics.”

In her classic essay, Fraser (1992) persuasively argues against the functionality of a singular public sphere (or the “bourgeois public sphere” first offered by Habermas), because even in egalitarian societies and “under conditions of cultural diversity and in the absence of structural inequality,” a unitary sphere of discourse would include a cultural lens, effectively privileging the voice of one group over others; therefore, she suggests that it would be advantageous to foster “parallel discursive areas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional
interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). Counterpublics are not necessarily virtuous (in fact, they may advance hate-filled or non-democratic rhetoric) but they create spaces where participants are enabled to “collectively create discourses apart from the common narrative” (Korn & Kneese, 2015, p. 708). Rather than taking a fully techno-utopian perspective, boyd (2011) admits that networked publics are messy and also not universally virtuous (evidence of this can be found on several dozen of the more problematic subreddits), but she asserts their utility by pointing out that such structures do account for the ways that technology restructures spaces and collections of people. Networked publics do not always have the “emancipatory potential” that Fraser (1990) ascribes to subaltern counterpublics, but do seem to “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment,” in which identities can be collaboratively worked out amongst people with similar worldviews (p. 68).

Green domesticity blogs, and wellness blogs in general, make room for discussion about lifestyle decisions that simultaneously speak against and reinforce neoliberal citizenship. This apparent paradox lies in what Binkley (2008) calls a “fetishized de-fetishization” of consumerism, or what Zukin (2008) describes as practices that attempt to use specific consumption practices to undermine mass consumption. Szasz (2007) offers another articulation of the same concept, which he labels an “inverted quarantine,” the practice of assembling a personal commodity bubble to protect self and family from the fear of constant exposure to toxics and contamination in one’s immediate environment. The education and awareness that green domestic bloggers ostensibly want to provide their readers is an individualized, private sphere practice that ultimately does more harm than good:

Doing inverted quarantine changes people’s experience. It alters their perception of their situation. Their sense of being at risk diminishes. The feeling, correct or not, that they
have done something effective to protect themselves reduces the urgency to do something more about what, until then, felt threatening to them. If many people experience such a reduction in urgency, that will have consequences in a democracy, in a society where mass sentiment affects what government does. (p. 195)

This sense of “political anesthesia,” while based on a desire to push back against a perceived systemic failure of government to protect citizens from harm at the hands of corporations who produce potentially harmful food and domestic goods, ends up neutralizing the potential and collective political agency that a robust counterpublic could generate. It becomes only one of many narratives of resistance that “hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies,” leading not to substantive democratic participation and instead reinforcing “the post-political formation of communicative capitalism” by reducing collective issues to “personal micropolitics” (Dean, 2005, p. 53). In my analysis of green domestic blogs, I did not find spaces that could unequivocally be called counterpublics or even counterhegemonic, but rather individualized narratives of resistance and oppositional identity that still appear to reify dominant (and “commonsense”) ideas about neoliberal citizenship.

**Critical Internet Studies and the individualization hypothesis.**

The techno-utopianism of the late 1980s and early 1990s imagined an Internet that would strengthen democratic participation and transparency, allow consumers to keep tabs on corporate misbehavior, and allow people from all geographic regions and all social classes (in the U.S., at least) to have equal access to information and uncensored knowledge (Foster & McChesney, 2011, para. 4). And some scholars do still argue that the Internet, and Web 2.0 technology especially, has created a sort of partially realized Habermasian public sphere where new voices
can be heard and almost anyone can express themselves creatively or politically (Bennett, 1998; Bennett et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Ford, 2013). But the Internet’s public-sphere potential is immediately limited by two factors: lack of formal structure and privatization. Digital spaces, having no formal connection to decision-making, are at best representative of a Habermasian “weak sphere,” where policies cannot be decided or enacted. According to Dahlgren (2009), a weak digital sphere is a place where identities can be formed and space can be made for articulation and foment of new – and sometimes unpopular – ideas. Furthermore, the corporatization of the Internet over the past two decades has led to a closing – or at least a privatization, facilitated by the increasing presence of Web 2.0 interactivity – of what was once optimistically expected to be a digital global commons (Carah & Louw, 2015). Without transparency, and without the ability of users to affect the structure, features, and services of the platforms on which they create and communicate, what we know as interactivity is not equivalent to meaningful participation (Fuchs, 2012).

Studying digital media from a critical perspective requires updated ways of thinking about the purpose of analysis. In fact, Andrejevic (2009) says that to account for Web 2.0 we need a new version of critical media studies – “Critical Media Studies 2.0” – to help make sense of the fact that even in a digital age, characterized by interactivity, structures of power and social relations are largely unchanged from the era of “old media” (p. 35). Although online communication may seem ephemeral, “social media interactions are informed by certain materialities, and they have the capacity to affect economic, social, and cultural arenas” (Korn & Kneese, 2015, p. 707). Online interaction, in other words, is not emancipated from pre-existing structures of inequality and oppression. Therefore, from a critical perspective it makes sense to approach study of the Internet using the principles of political economy, which provide the
conceptual tools to critique the form and function of corporate social media platforms and other digital service providers. In other words, since the corporatized internet is not participatory in the democratic sense, then it would best be studied by drawing on Marxist concepts of class, exploitation, and surplus value (Fuchs, 2008).

Critical Internet Studies, then, offers a way to make sense of corporate domination, and to take stock of the purpose and function of the structural features and mechanisms that generate revenue for bloggers, advertisers, and service providers. It also provides a framework for understanding various types of digital labor and the generation and distribution of revenue in online spaces. But the complexity and permeability of the hybrid texts that make up the green domesticity networked public still call for another type of analysis, one that is more concerned with bloggers’ identities (which are, of course, connected to the immaterial labor they perform; no section of this inquiry is completely exclusive from the whole) and how ideology is communicated within and through the content they create. Starting in the late 2000s, much qualitative online identity research began to follow what Miller (2011) calls the “individualization hypothesis.” This approach is based on the work of scholars who originally conceptualized lifestyle as an ongoing and individual identity project, including Bauman, (2007), Chaney (1996, 2001), and Giddens (1991), among others. Their work argues that we are less connected to the institutions, past traditions, and shared history that used to create a relatively stable identity. This separation means that individuals have now become responsible to continuously build and work on their own narratives of the self, a demand that fits well with the neoliberal pressure to constantly “work on one’s self,” or what Giddens (1991) calls a “reflexive project” of self. This is significant to the study of digital identity because one of, if not the, central ways to create a sense of self is through lifestyle associations (addressed in Chapter 5).

5 A more detailed description of their work can be found in Chapter 2.
Two). Lifestyles are often associated with consumer behavior, because commodities now function – to a greater degree than even socioeconomic class – as cultural signs that can be “read” by others who are aware of their significance (Featherstone, 1987). Lifestyle is a performative and fluid type of identity, learned through exposure to others in the group (although this exposure is often mediated, so the individualized nature of lifestyle construction and maintenance is not undermined), and online resources help adherents learn about which sorts of commodities are associated with their lifestyle grouping. As I will argue, this is certainly the case in the green domesticity blog networked public.

Another component of the individualized nature of online identity construction is that although many social media users spend a significant amount of time participating in networked communication, Couldry (2010) suggests that the characteristics of neoliberal society make it difficult for our voices – our identities – to be recognized in ways that matter. When we construct – or, perhaps, perform – our identities online, we find that process to be meaningful only when our digital selves are recognized by others, and they only become valuable when positioned in networks of social relations. In other words, the value of the identities we create “are bound up with our capacity to give an account of our life and its conditions” that “will be recognized by others and contribute towards shaping the world we live in” (Carah & Louw, 2015, p. 310). These identities might have personal value to us but it is crucial to remember that we are not in control of the means of production; some groups have more power and access to resources that create meaning and maintain the status quo. And it is precisely those groups who control technologies “for controlling flows of meaning, and watching and responding to populations,” as well as the ability to “control and manage communication processes” (Carah & Louw, 2015, p. 310).
Selection of Blogs

For my analysis, I selected 25 eco-friendly lifestyle blogs authored by women; all of them were at least partially focused on domesticity or motherhood (see Appendix A for a complete list of blogs). I deliberately sought texts written by authors who clearly stated their commitment to environmentalism and leading a green lifestyle, and who offered guidance or instructional assistance to other women who wish to practice the same. The authors also commodified their digital spaces and identities through the sale of merchandise, hosting of advertising or sponsored content, or the accumulation of user data, and in most cases they documented the private experiences of the authors and, occasionally, their families. With one exception, the blogs also included social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest), and several had digital storefronts (such as Etsy pages or Amazon stores).

I started with Christina Anthis’s Hippy Homemaker blog, which is what initially drew my attention to this research topic and is briefly discussed in Chapter One. In a post from December of 2016 Christina wrote about her plans to attend ShiftCon 2017, “a conference for eco-friendly organic-loving bloggers and social media superstars” (Anthis, 2016). ShiftCon attendees, or “shifters,” are green lifestyle influencers who “seek healthier and more sustainable lives, promote brands that mirror their values, and help causes that speak to their soul” (“About ShiftCon”). At the conference, bloggers learn about eco-wellness and green lifestyles while getting tips and guidance on growing their platforms and extending their sphere of influence.

Searching through the ShiftCon site, I was able to find a number of blogs to include in my analysis. Of particular use was a list of bloggers who were up for various Shifter Awards, in categories such as Best Natural Parenting Blog, Best Lifestyle Blogger, Best Resource for Moms, and Best Vegan Blogger. The three finalists in each category were peer-nominated and of
the 30 blogs in the final round, nine fit my four major criteria: the authors were “average”
women (i.e., not celebrities or well-known media figures before they became bloggers); they
shared personal stories about their experiences and in some cases their families as well; they had
an explicitly stated eco-friendly mission; and they included content about multiple “lifestyle”
categories (rather than being narrowly focused on a single topic such as food, travel, or exercise).
Additional blogs were identified using the keyword search function on sites that quantify and
track influence among bloggers (Cison and Top Mommy Blogs) as well as the blog aggregation
site Bloglovin’. This sample is certainly not exhaustive, and it in fact evolved over time as my
analysis progressed. According to Potter (1996), adding new texts to a preliminary list in order to
address gaps or new questions that may arise is part of the iterative qualitative research process
and enhances the critical researcher’s ability to be self-reflexive.

Although I actively looked for relevant blogs authored by women of color, only one
ultimately met my four requirements (*The Crunchy Mommy*, written by Aaronica Bell Cole, a
finalist in two Shift Award categories). The other 27 primary authors⁶ appear white, and
instances of religious, racial, or ethnic diversity were rare: Sarah UmmYousef of *Nature’s
Nurture* is Muslim; Lindsey G. of *So Easy Being Green* is married to a man of Filipino descent,
with whom she has two daughters; Lacey Mackey (*Natureal Mom*) and Lori Popkewitz Alper
(*Groovy Green Living*) are Jewish. None of the authors explicitly identified themselves as
LGBTQ, although Lindsay Dahl (*Lindsay Dahl*) occasionally posts on queer and trans* politics.
Twenty-four of them are currently married to men, and 25 of them are mothers (with no direct
mentions of adoption). None discuss having disability (although two moms write about parenting
children with disability: autism and hip dysplasia), but several of the women cite either personal

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⁶ The Soft Landing is co-authored by three sisters and their mother, so altogether my selection contains 28 primary bloggers
or familial illness as a motivation for their work as eco-bloggers. This feeling of obligation to actively “take on” the work of curing illness illustrates Korn and Kneese’s (2015) suggestion that immaterial digital labor “performed for social networking sites” is a direct reflection of “other forms of embodied, domestic, reproductive, affective, and care work” (p. 707).

**Elements of Blogs Included in Analysis**

According to McKee (2001), every individual research method is “partial, producing particular and quite limited kinds of information” (p. 138). The multi-modality and complex structure of digital texts amplifies the potential limitations and partiality, since different techniques are appropriate for different textual elements. To address this issue in my research, I initially approached various elements separately before considering them together in their social context in Chapter Six.

Blog analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved collecting a standard set of data from each blog and entering those details into a form to facilitate direct comparison of textual features (see Appendix B for the form). The second stage was more interpretive, using semiotic analysis to identify recurring signs, as well as a close reading of blogs to find frequently-occurring themes. Following the basic guidelines of (feminist) critical discourse analysis, my reading of these digital texts necessarily examined the discursive function of words and images, but it also included consideration of how certain structural features of blogs and social media sites (tabs, hashtags, and categories; “About Me” and “Disclosure” pages; and commercial mechanisms like affiliate links, sponsored content, and sites of data collection) worked to support central discourses about gender, class, consumerism, and sustainability. The information I gathered can be roughly divided into two categories: first, the structure (or
architecture and mechanisms that allow interactivity) of the blogs and second, prominent discourses in content. These categories are not mutually exclusive; some features possess characteristics in both. For example, a giveaway post tells the reader something about the author’s ideology but it also serves the function of gathering user data through widgets like Rafflecopter, and Instagram hashtags direct the reader toward a preferred interpretation but also serve to situate the post in the Instagram universe and hopefully increase exposure. Gathering information about structural features and interactivity was relatively straightforward. Since the networks all had a similar form (i.e., a central blog page linked to several social media accounts), they make use of similar interactive mechanisms.

Finding recurring discourses within the text that were communicated more directly via words or visual images was a bit more complicated. For this, I opted to combine techniques from three common qualitative methods: semiotics, thematic analysis, and frame identification. While semiotics can be used to derive meaning about signs or signifiers that are not in visual image form, in this research it has primarily been applied to analyzing pictures, logos, and colors. Images and other visual features “work” as signs; what they signify can only be interpreted in the context of meaning-making ideological structures (Gaines, 2008). Like most qualitative methods, semiotics is subjective, but the goal is to relate components of the text to broader discourses, connecting them to “the system of messages in which they operate” (Stokes, 2003, p. 72). An example of this would be logos on a large number of the blogs, which were either very simple and mostly black-and-white or involved green letters or green foliage in some way. All of them also used white as a background or block font color (see Fig. 2). In the context of this networked
public, this combination of colors and design implies simplicity, clarity, purity, and eco-friendliness, all very desirable characteristics in green domesticity blog culture. Recognizing themes in media texts requires multiple close readings.

Bernard and Ryan (2003) offer several observational techniques that can indicate the presence of a theme; this dissertation uses four of them. Perhaps the most basic is repetition: finding words or concepts that appear frequently in a text (or, as is the case in the present study,}

*Figure 3-2: Simple white, black, and green logos appeared on nearly every blog, indicating simplicity, eco-friendliness, and cleanliness.*
across a set of texts). The second technique, locating indigenous categories, involves making note of “familiar words that are used in unfamiliar ways” (Bernard & Ryan, 2003, p. 89). I also looked for two types of linguistic connectors: phrases that indicate a belief in particular causal relationships (e.g., vaccines cause autism, or the practice of juice-fasting rids the body of toxins); and phrases that create and ascribe value to taxonomic categories (e.g., gluten and high fructose corn syrup are bad, animal texting and factory farming are inhumane). Finally, Bernard and Ryan (2003) stress the importance of looking for missing data. While I found several notable gaps in content, the most significant missing element in the green domesticity networked public is diversity. As I discuss in more detail below, the authors themselves and other people appearing on their blogs or social network profiles were overwhelmingly white, and further investigation indicated a lack of queer representation, visible disability, and financial insecurity.

Identifying themes in the collection of blogs was the first step in my research, but close reading and consideration continued throughout the development of my dissertation. In fact, Potter (1996) says that analysis should not be seen as “a discrete step in the research process,” but rather an ongoing practice that refines research questions and informs planning during the writing phase (p. 121). Therefore, my interpretation of which themes are the most significant shifted as I became more familiar with the blogs (and began to feel a sense of familiarity to the authors) and even as I organized and drafted chapters of this document. In other words, I took an inductive approach to thematic analysis, allowing the them to evolve as I gathered more data.

Frame identification, on the other hand, was conducted in a deductive manner. There is no shortage of literature that explains the function of frames in mass media, but an agreed-upon
description of reliable frame composition practices and identification techniques is harder to find. The concept was initially popularized in sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1974) well-known work, *Framing Analysis*, and has since been utilized by scholars in many disciplines. With proliferation came lack of clarity. Denzin & Keller (1991) try to address this uncertainty by arguing that what Goffman originally offered was less about social action or interpretation of human behavior, but instead intended to be “a structural analysis of selected (and to our thinking) peripheral aspects of everyday experience” (p. 53). Although it is based in structuralism, which has been the subject of academic critique for several decades, this is definition is still functional for critical media studies because the focus is not on determining intent or interpreting action but rather on attempting to learn something. Framing is about social structures and their (latent or elided) influence the forces that affect our worldview, which is expressed – whether explicitly or implicitly – through media and popular culture. Especially taking Lewis’s (2009) thoughts about the purpose of critical media studies into account, mass media is a perfect site for this type of framing-based research. Frames are interpretive patterns that serve constitutive and persuasive functions. They help “construct a particular view or orientation to some aspect of reality” which organizes how we see the world, but frames can also have the effect of privileging a particular worldview (Cox, 2016, p. 63). In other words, as constructed ways of thinking, they are always already ideological.

According to Entman (1993), frames are meant to serve four functions. First, they define problems, which typically involves identifying an active “causal agent” at the center of the problem; second, they diagnose causes, pointing to the forces that are creating the problem in question (Entman, 1993). Once the issue is formulated in terms of who or what is causing trouble

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Accounting for the subjective nature of qualitative research, I recognize that different frames are likely to be identified and variously interpreted by different scholars. I am referring only to the lack of agreement about how to “do” textual analysis using framing as a specific research method.
and why, frames make moral judgments about the causal agent(s) and what they are doing. Finally, frames suggest remedies to address the problem and mitigate its effects. Once again, and although frame analysis is not always associated with critical theory, the last two functions (moral judgment and suggesting remedies) mirror the critical commitment to producing research that is normative and which seeks to address social injustice. Deductive frame analysis involves deriving frames from pre-existing theoretical principles; therefore, my process of deduction started with political economy and feminist theory. After combining the themes and considering commonalities in blog structure I identified two prominent frames: the true wellness frame and the obligatory empowerment frame. These will be discussed in Chapter Six.

It is important to note that both thematic analysis and framing analysis can be conducted either inductively or deductively; this flexibility makes them attractive methods for qualitative text-based researchers (for a discussion of inductive and deductive reasoning in thematic analysis, see Bernard & Ryan (2003) and Nowell et al., (2017); for a similar treatment of framing analysis, see Matthes (2009) and Matthes & Kohring (2008)). My decisions about reasoning in these two methods were deliberate and considered. Allowing themes to “reveal themselves” as I read and re-read the blogs was a natural way to start the research process and helped my initial articulation and subsequent revision of my research questions. On the other hand, deriving frames from political economy and feminist theory makes sense as a way to evaluate discourse from a critical perspective and understand how neoliberal and patriarchal structures (among others) have shaped the texts. The pairing of these two methods approximates Potter’s (1996) “iterative process,” in which research starts with “no formal a priori expectations,” but the researcher “necessarily must have some initial formulation of a problem in general terms” (p. 117). In this dissertation, the initial formulation of the problem grew out of my critical
orientation and general concern about the relationship between postfeminism, immaterial labor, and lifestyle politics in neoliberal culture.

Common elements of digital structure were numerous and not difficult to identify. An overview of which elements became points of focus follows, but their significance is explained in Chapters Four and Five. Some bloggers made use of several social media platforms, while others used a limited number (generally, Facebook and Instagram were part of every individual network). Direct requests for user information, mostly email addresses, frequently offered eBooks, educational resources, or electronic newsletters in return or, in the case of giveaway widgets, the promise of winning a product that the blogger had recommended. Organization of blog space was considered by looking through navigation tabs and, when possible, category tags (i.e., “filed under…”). Finally, I also noted the nature and frequency of hyperlinks, which were most often either commercial (sending the user to a digital commercial space), or synergistic (to another blog post or a social media profile), but occasionally were educational, sending users to outside sources of information meant to validate the blogger’s claims.

Most of these structural and discursive elements contribute in some way to creating patterns of commodification. For example, a number of blogs included tabs or category tags that identified products that the author had endorsed, with or without compensation. The visibility of compensation disclaimers was considered; although the FTC requires a disclaimer or disclosure of compensation (whether monetary or in the form of free products for review purposes), those disclosures were not always easy to find. They also varied in tone: some were essentially standard boilerplate text, while others were far more personal and used language that implied familiarity or friendship. Legally, such pages must specify how bloggers are compensated: sponsored reviews, revenue from publisher networks, traditional ads, and so on. Privacy pages,
where bloggers list details about what sort of user data (usually passive data, including location information and device type, which is gathered by cookies and does not require consent because it is considered “voluntary”) is being gathered, by whom, and who it is ultimately shared with, are not legally required in all cases, and so were less common. When they did appear, it was most often to specify that the blogger did not share data with corporate entities such as Google AdSense. “Affiliate links” — hyperlinks that direct viewers to a site, often a page on Amazon.com, where they can purchase specific items — were common, but clarity about the fact that the blogger would receive money for any item purchased after following the link was not universal.

In some cases, bloggers made media kits available. These feature data about page visits and the demographic composition of audiences as well as information about other brand partnerships and advertising rates or terms about sponsored posts and product reviews. Media kits were only found on blogs that were not part of a publisher network, which essentially acts as an intermediary between the bloggers and advertisers who would like to work with them. The most common of these is the Conde Nast-associated “Full Service Ad Management” network MediaVine, who unironically describe themselves thusly: “We’re not an ad network. We’re a family. We are about our publishers, and want them to succeed in all aspects of their business,” (Welcome to MediaVine).

Several of the authors also directly offered services such as “social media optimization,” consultation for other aspiring bloggers, guest posts, or speaking engagements. These elements all reveal patterns of commodification, whether of products (which are often framed as solutions to various health or environmental threats), or of the bloggers and their labor (which was in some
cases relatively visible, but minimized or made virtually invisible in others), or of audiences (through data collection conducted by the actual blog, an advertiser, or a platform owner).

After looking at these structural and interactive features, I moved on to discourses within the content itself, starting with the broadest features of each blog. The aesthetics and layout of the blog’s landing page was the first thing I considered, including details like colors, “above the fold” images, presence and placement of social media widgets, arrangement of navigation categories, presence or absence of squeeze pages or email address requests, advertisements, and so on. From the landing pages, I moved to the authors’ “About Me” pages. In addition to biographical information, these tend to include some sort of origin story about what inspired the author to start blogging. Most About Me pages also give the reader an indication of what the authors hope to achieve through their blogs. Commonly, About Me pages are where we see the establishment of frames about environmental issues and green lifestyles, frames which are then supported in posts and other content.

After these three standard pages, I turned to associated social media profiles. I limited my analysis to the main three platforms, which were used by nearly every blogger: Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Here, I noted each blogger’s frequency of posts, cross-posting of content, numbers of followers and likes, and notable differences in use between platforms. Since each platform has its own function and community norms, I also considered them individually. For instance, I looked at the general subject matter of Instagram photos and each blogger’s most common hashtags, the format of content posted on Facebook (i.e., videos, images, “status”-style updates, interactions with readers and other bloggers, etc.), and frequency of original Tweets vs. retweets. I also closely surveyed specific content. While it would have been impractical to look at every post I identified several examples from each blog; generally, I started by looking at the
most recent posts, I looked at items which were specifically identified as “Top Posts” if the blog made such a designation. I paid special attention to content that appeared on multiple platforms (for example, a blog post that was linked on the Facebook page and then represented by a photo and a series of hashtags on Instagram).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored my position and subjectivity as a researcher and detailed the methods that have structured my work throughout the rest of this dissertation. In the next chapter, I begin discussing the results of my analysis and start crafting a narrative about the shared identity traits of the women in my sample.
CHAPTER FOUR: “MY HEART TURNED GREEN!”

BLOGGER MOTIVATIONS AND IDENTITIES

In the traditional sense, a crunchy mommy is a granola mom.

You know, the moms that people consider to be hippies.

- Aronica Cole, *The Crunchy Mommy*

My mom was diagnosed with a brain tumor for the fourth time, my little one was suffering from Eczema and then one day my friend Angela said to me, “Did you know they wash chickens in chlorine?”

- Lisa Fennessy, *This Organic Girl*

The story of *Creative Green Living*, shared by author Carissa Bonham, starts with the birth of her son. Baby K, as she calls him, was a “true miracle baby;” after a struggle with infertility and several miscarriages Carissa and her husband were “blessed” by God with a viable pregnancy that they attribute to the “power of prayer” (unlike most of the blogs in my study, Christianity is a central part of *Creative Green Living*). The difficulty of Baby K’s conception and the health complications she experienced while pregnant are what inspired her to “focus on [a] healthier, greener” lifestyle for her family, which now includes a second son. According to Carissa, the moment she transitioned into motherhood is when her “heart turned green.” Although the enthusiastic integration of faith into her blog is unique, Carissa’s sources of inspiration as a green domesticity blogger – becoming a mother and overcoming a health problem – seem to be very common.
This chapter will explore constructions of identity that are common among the green mom blogger. As we will see, bloggers present themselves as caring and responsible mothers who can enact the best versions of their motherhood through a green lifestyle. Tied with this are declarations of counter-culture ideology, relationships to food and commodification, the idea of consumption as a form of politics, and an “every mom” ethos that creates common ground with users while also reinforcing their own authority. Such identity constructions often are connected with tips about living a greener lifestyle, but also carry with them assumptions about individual agency and an embrace of a proper kind of consumption.

But Now, as a Wife and Mom…

The beginning of motherhood was cited as a life-changing event for the majority of authors with children (two of the women are not moms). They commonly recount how feelings of protectiveness toward their babies pushed them to start researching the safety of food and household products, which cultivated a new ecological awareness that directed them toward green domesticity. Taking care of kids and (in most cases) husbands includes protecting them from dangerous chemicals, “toxins,” and unhealthy additives in food. Moreover, the extra time and effort required to make household products rather than purchasing them or to cook homemade meals was valorized as a “labor of love.” While affective or caretaking labor has long been the assumed domain of women, the bloggers in my study predominantly work not only toward reclaiming domestic skills but also strive to shield their families from perceived environmental and health-related threats. Fox (1990) observed that the narrative of caretaking labor as a protective measure over the “family unit” becomes more salient in times of social
turbulence, so early-21st-century worries about a destabilized economy and the precarious state of the natural environment have likely contributed to this rekindled interest in “women’s work.”

References to being “crunchy,” “granola,” or a “hippy” were roughly matched by flat rejections of those stereotypical labels. However, many of the women playfully acknowledged their granola-tendencies while still disavowing the complete hippy persona. Michelle Marine (Simplify, Live, Love) describes herself as “semi-crunchy,” for example, and Katie Wells (Wellness Mama) confesses that she often forgets that she is “weird” by “normal standards.” Madeline Somerville (Sweet Madeline) pokes fun at “preachy Enviro-nags” but still refers to herself as an “undercover hippy” with “tree-hugging sentiments and Mother-Nature-loving ways.” Whether they embraced the green stereotype or not, similar central commitments were expressed by every blogger in my sample. First, eliminating processed or non-organic food was cited as an objective whether or not the author had children (and regardless of whether they specifically wrote about food). Second, minimizing exposure to dangerous substances in household and personal care products was a universal topic of discussion. Finally, taking a more holistic approach to physical wellbeing was an explicit commitment in 21 of the 26 blogs. Less specifically, consideration of more “natural” or nontraditional health practices (and an at least implicit assumption that failure to address the first two problems would eventually cause illness or disease) was present in to some extent in all of them.

Seemingly Innocent Sliced Peaches

Meghann (who primarily writes about cooking and shares recipes at Simple Green Moms) describes the anxiety that came with parenthood, confessing that once she had children her formerly laid-back approach to grocery shopping changed dramatically: “Suddenly, food was
downright scary.” She was “horrified” to find ingredients like high fructose corn syrup, aspartame, and MSG in her daughter’s fruit cups and yogurt, a discovery which inspired her to eliminate processed food and start purchasing organic dairy and vegetables. Similarly motivated, Lisa F. admits that she may have taken things a little too far at first, refusing to eat at restaurants or “even look at processed or refined food…Those were the dark days.” After the overzealous introductory period, she settled on daily a routine of preparing completely organic and predominantly gluten-free meals for her family of four.

More than any other topic of discussion, food and recipes were categorized using terms that create a sense of moral value. Common phrases like “real food” and “clean eating,” when used to refer to organic vegetables or free-range meats, implicitly reinforce the idea that processed foods or conventionally-grown produce are artificial, impure, or even “garbage.” Likewise, equating “simple” with “healthy” when describing recipes refers not necessarily to the amount of effort or skill required, but rather to the idea that ingredients should be “basic” or “natural,” coming from one’s own garden or a farmer’s market rather than a grocery chain. Lisa Bryan explains this clean and simple “food philosophy” on her blog Downshiftology as a “back-to-basics approach where the complexity of our current food supply is stripped away. No more artificial preservatives, colors, flavors or ingredients you can’t pronounce. Essentially, get rid of all the nasties!”

This embracing of the natural and the resulting discursive rejection of aspects of the modern often mixed in the blogs with an acceptance of other traditional practices, including ones that flowed with notions of conventional gender roles and expectations. These practices also made assumptions about time, for example referencing “slow food” practices that rhetorically reject the sped-up (and presumably unhealthy) practices of modernity, such as fast-food
purchases, packaged food preparation, and meal times that are dictated by one’s work or school schedule. However, as Sharma (2014) notes, seemingly counter-culture trends such as the slow-food movement also reveal social privileges, including assumptions about time flexibility that is class privileged.

Illustrating this, making meals from scratch and eating a sit-down family dinner were both positioned as desirable behaviors and even when time-saving tricks were recommended they often came with a disclaimer that the author would prefer to do things “the long way.” In a post on Natureal Mom, Lackey Mackey starts a pressure cooker stew recipe by explaining that she “actually enjoy[s] standing over the stove and preparing homemade soups and stews” and Tiffany Ray (Organic Parenthood) explains that she makes use of a simplified baked chicken recipe not to save time or energy but rather so that her children can help out. Mentions of sharing the cooking load with one’s partner were very rare and tended to emphasize that a husband may prepare food from time to time, but the results might be less than ideal. For example, Lindsay G. (So Easy Being Green) explained that on occasions when “hubby cooks,” he leaves the kitchen looking like a “flour bomb” has been detonated and she can only enjoy the meal once she has “clean[ed] up the mess that he has made.” Thus, labor associated with feeding the family is consistently presented, or even naturalized, as a feminine and maternal obligation.

These value judgments about food purity and preparation are discursively reinforced throughout the green domestic public sphere, but food-related commodification is also a pervasive theme. For example, while perusing recipe archives (either a category or tag on all but three blogs), I noticed that several cooking devices were featured conspicuously. Instant Pot, by far the most common of these, was described by around half of the authors as an extremely versatile and time-saving appliance. Repetition both within and across blogs creates positive
associations and positions the product as safe, healthy, and easy to use. Carissa B. tested her Instant Pot for heavy metals including lead, cadmium, and mercury and reassured readers that it was no more toxic than a Starbucks mug. Lindsey G. users hers “for almost everything in the kitchen” and a post on *The Soft Landing* promises that an entire “super easy homemade Thanksgiving dinner in an Instant Pot is totally doable,” although preparing the entire suggested spread would seem to require over a dozen separate pots.

The prevalence of this particular gadget is not a coincidence: Instant Pot has relied exclusively on social media promotion, giving cookers to hundreds of bloggers and packaging their product with a cookbook of blogger-sourced recipes. While this particular brand of “multifunction electric pressure cooker” has an especially devoted online following, its price and range of functions are comparable to many others on the market (Lynch, 2017). By telling their followers about Instant Pot’s safety and versatility, the bloggers have “become promotional intermediaries, working in service of the brand,” leveraging their trustworthiness to create an association between the company name and a “particular way of being,” specifically the green domestic lifestyle (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 11). This promotional strategy relies on the viral transmission of sponsored word-of-mouth advertising, which does not involve paying lifestyle influencers directly for content placement but is still compensated with free merchandise (Einstein, 2016). Posts that endorse items which have been provided without cost are legally required to include a disclosure statement to that effect. The Federal Trade Commission (2017) specifies that an actual written explanation is required for each individual endorsement rather than just a hyperlink or a blanket disclosure statement for the entire website, but this was not
common practice. One blogger posted at least seven separate Instant Pot recipes which omitted the direct statement and disclosure hyperlink, yet included multiple affiliate links.\(^8\)

**No One is Running the Show**

Finding (or making) non-toxic alternatives to mainstream household products and beauty supplies was a second major topic of concern, appearing in 24 of the 25 blogs. The authors were suspicious of the ingredients in everything from lipstick to window cleaner. At *Body Unburdened*, Nadia Neumann recalls that her “mind was blown and [her] life was forever changed” when she discovered that there was a carcinogenic substance in “ALL of [her] skincare and makeup products. Seriously – every single one of them” (she doesn’t specify which chemical). In multiple recipes for natural deodorant, Christina A. calls out aluminum – a common ingredient in antiperspirants – as a toxic substance with “extremely damaging effects,” but she does not offer further explanation or evidence. The rather vague introduction at the top of *Wellness Mama*’s “Beauty” category page reads: “Conventional beauty products contain harmful chemicals and additives. These natural beauty recipes are alternatives to popular products and contain beneficial ingredients for your skin.”

Aside from a general lack of specificity, all but three of the blogs failed to discuss the regulatory atmosphere that has led to the proliferation of the substances that they have identified as dangerous. For example, cosmetics and beauty products do not need to have pre-market Federal Drug Administration safety approval (FDA, 2017). Whether or not a substance is defined

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\(^8\) Under the FTC’s suggested practices for bloggers, affiliate links also require individual disclosure statements when the product disclosure does not make it clear that the reviewer was compensated or if the reviewer purchased the product with their own money but still profited from the affiliate links. In this case, such clarifications were completely absent.
as “hazardous” is legally defined by the Federal Hazardous Substances Act (FHSA), but oversight of hazards in consumer products. But in these blogs the picture painted of the regulatory environment is a free-for-all, with no sufficient oversight of what we consume; it is therefore a frightening world of potential poisons which the blogs’ DIY ethos can help readers to counter.

I didn’t want to slather them in steroids

The benefits of holistic health solutions over commercialized medicine were overwhelmingly part of the green domestic lifestyle rationale. Tiffany Washko, author of Nature Moms Blog, was “driven to a more natural lifestyle” in her late 20s by a diagnosis of late-stage colon cancer. Already a stay-at-home mother of two, she began making dietary and household changes in order reduce her family’s exposure to toxins and credits cancer with helping “see fully just how closely linked our lifestyle and our product and food choices are to bad health and disease” (Washko, 2010). The “point of diagnosis” is, like motherhood, often presented as a discrete threshold separating the authors from their previously oblivious and non-green lifestyle. Lisa B. says that she “got smacked sideways” by the discovery that she had “not one, not two or three…but four autoimmune diseases,” which she attributes to having been a “corporate warrior…addicted to my devices” and living a “stressaholic, workaholic, crappy foodaholic” life. For Katie Wells (Wellness Mama), coming across an article about shortened life expectancy in her doctor’s office “hit [her] like a ton of bricks,” a sensation which was reinforced shortly that when she was diagnosed with thyroid disease.

Even for women who did not experience a dramatic health-related event, preferences skewed toward “natural remedies” or “alternative health” practices. Several authors touted the
benefits of liquid-based “detoxifying” cleanses. Aronica C. tells readers that “detoxing” can prevent illness and heal chronic fatigue, and Christina A. suggests “teatoxing” with a charcoal-based lemonade to improve kidney function. Tiffany W. claims that coffee enemas are a great way to support one’s liver; her post explains that “over the past 60+ years more than 60,000 new chemicals have entered our environments and over 300 of those have found to be residing in our bodies” (Washko, 2018). She does not offer supporting evidence. A 2008 Harvard study concluded that “internal cleansing may empty your wallet” but does not improve the body’s ability to filter harmful substances. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a government agency that is responsible for conducting research on alternative medical practices, concurs with that finding and adds that “cleansing procedures may have [harmful] side effects, some of which can be serious” (“Detoxes and Cleanses,” 2017).

The health benefits of various diets were a frequent topic of discussion as well. For Lisa B., following the “Paleolithic” diet has been a way to heal her “leaky gut syndrome” (Bryan, 2015). Paleo guidelines include eliminating dairy, processed grains, and refined sugars, sacrifices which can make nutritional sense in the right circumstances (Jabr, 2013). However, there is no evidence to suggest that intestinal permeability – the more official-sounding name for a collection of symptoms that many Paleo proponents refer to as “leaky gut” – is reduced by the diet; Brown et al. (2014) argue that most research linking nutrition to disease in a causal relationship is characterized by a lack of scientific rigor and based on “unscientific beliefs” or anecdotal evidence. In many cases, including Lisa’s above-reference post, anecdotes are presented as proof. Suzi Swope (Gurl Gone Green) also shares her experience with the branded Paleo-adjacent Autoimmune Wellness™ diet, saying that her autoimmune condition was
drastically improved and implying that people who suffer from lupus, irritable bowel syndrome, or multiple sclerosis would likely experience similar results (Swope, 2018).

In several blogs, the line between holistic wellness advice and medical advice is not always clearly drawn, and indicates an ambivalent – or even just lip-service – relationship to western medicine and the mainstream health-care industry. For instance while Suzi’s post about autoimmune disorders does encourage “seek[ing] a medical professional,” she goes on to recommend over a dozen pro-Paleo resources (including a meal planning tool) and asks readers to share their Paleo journeys in the comments section. Some authors included a boilerplate disclaimer warning that the “statements on this website have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration” and advising readers to “make decisions in partnership with their health care provider” (Anthis, 2017) or clarifying that the advice provided in health-related posts is based on the author’s “opinions [and is] not intended to act as medical advice” (Bryan, n.d.). Such warnings notwithstanding, mistrust of Western medicine and the dominant model of medical research is a popular theme in green domesticity blogs and the wellness movement in general. As an attendee at a Goop-sponsored wellness event, journalist Sangeeta Sing-Kurtz (2018) reports that Gwyneth Paltrow introduced a guest speaker by saying “we love science and data [but]…there’s not always a double-blind study that can explain to us what Laura Lynne Jackson is going to do” (para. 5). Although many of the green domesticity bloggers did provide links to outside sources or (less frequently) cite “experts,” the reliability of these was sometimes questionable, if not outright pseudo-medicine.

Distrust of medicine sometimes manifests in questionable health claims or assumptions. In several posts about parenting Carissa cheerfully calls vaccination debates “part of the Mommy Wars,” saying: “Not being a doctor myself, I think it is smart to refer to one when I am
considering choices regarding medical care for my children.” Although she says she trusts her personal pediatrician, she hints that other pediatricians may recommend vaccines because of “the size of the kickback check he gets from vaccine manufacturers.” The celebrated pediatrician is Paul Thomas, who she credentials as not just a “Dartmouth-trained” physician but one who also is “also board certified in integrative and holistic medicine” (original emphasis). Thomas, however, is also labeled by one website as “a rising star in the antivaccine movement” (Orac, 2018). The blogger has a link to Thomas’s book about vaccines, noting that “Amazon will pay be a small commission” if a visitor clicks-through the attached link. She goes on to imply that vaccinations and autism are causally linked, insist that there is a sufficient quantity of aluminum in vaccine injections to induce immunological disorders, and suggest that the Center for Disease Control’s vaccination schedule was drafted under the influence of pharmaceutical companies (Bonham, 2013, 2016). These claims are based on the work of Thomas, and the content on Creative Green Living suggests that the medical community is divided on the safety of vaccines; in fact the majority of national and multi-national medical associations have clearly indicated consensus in acceptance of vaccine safety and efficacy (Green, 2015). National public health policies are part of a legal and regulatory system that is designed to ensure public safety; therefore seeking a religious or personal liberty exemption from the public school vaccination mandate (as Carissa encourages readers to do) is a politically charged behavior.

**Simple Steps: Buying Your Own Safety**

The products that go on, inside, or around one’s body comprise what Szasz (2007) calls a “personal commodity bubble”; he argues that Americans have come to “fear that they are constantly exposed to toxins in their immediate environment,” a concern which is not wholly
reactionary or irrational (p. 97). Their very proximity to our physical bodies makes chemical-based cleaning products, processed food, and fluoridated toothpaste seem especially capable of causing health problems. Previous research has identified these three groups (along with content focused on love or romance) as the basic building blocks of most women’s lifestyle blogs, a finding which is reinforced by my analysis of the green domestic networked public (Ouellette & Wilson, 2015; Roca-Scales & Garcia, 2017). Under the “Reviews” tab on Tiffany Ray’s *Organic Parenthood*, product endorsements are arranged to reflect the inverted quarantine (“Outside the Body,” “Inside the Body,” “Around the Home”). Nadia N. has organized her entire blog into the same categories (“Real Food,” “Natural Beauty,” “Healthy Home”), as has Lisa F. (“Clean Beauty,” “Clean Eats,” “Clean Living”).

Worries about the extent and effect of immediate-vicinity toxic exposure was directly expressed by the majority of the authors in my study, particularly attached to anxiety about their children’s safety. Sarah UmmYousef’s blog, *Nature’s Nurture*, promises confidence and peace of mind to mothers who are overwhelmed and worried about the presence of toxins and harmful chemicals in their home. Recounting her experience as a first-time mom, Sarah says that learning about the presence of “chemicals [she] could barely pronounce” in many of her household products left her feeling “helpless at the thought of exposing [her] precious new baby to” dangerous ingredients. By making her own natural products whenever possible, and switching “mainstream” home and body care products for “safe, non-toxic” items, Sarah has created an inverted quarantine (Szasz, 2007).

Larger, long-term dangers like climate change or far-away deforestation are difficult to conceptualize and finding their solutions is daunting and confusing. Buying organic tomatoes is comparatively simple and gives an instantaneous feeling of accomplishment. Paradoxically, as
awareness of the scope and seriousness of environmental problems has grown, it seems as though “the sense of agency that individuals have to meaningfully address these problems is further eroded” (World Wildlife Fund, 2008). This feeling of powerlessness has allowed “small steps campaigns” based on market logic to flourish. A marketing approach to environmental change encourages “simple and painless” lifestyle changes in the hopes that widespread adoption of small efforts will create large behavioral shifts and that people, once motivated to make eco-friendly choices, will decide to pursue more ambitious environmental activism (WWF, 2008). This approach discursively hails individuals as consumers rather than citizens, or as the hybrid consumer-citizen subject (Einstein, 2012). Unfortunately, there is a documented trend of “negative spillover” with the small-steps strategy, in which a minor lifestyle adjustment discourages people from following up with larger projects that take more effort; this is especially true when behavioral changes are motivated by concern for individual or familial health rather than a desire to stop doing harm to the natural world for the common good (Lecasse, 2013; WWF, 2008, 2009). Szasz (2007) concludes, somewhat depressingly, that since neoliberal social conditions like deregulation and privatization have normalized market logic we will continue to focus on commodified self-protection and the creation of individual safety zones.

The small-steps discourse is present to some extent in every blog I read. A few authors, especially Lindsay Dahl (Lindsay Dahl) and Tiffany W. (Nature Moms), encourage readers to be more active with their political commitments by writing letters, going to rallies, and making environmentalism a central commitment when voting. Several more blogs promoted certain patterns of consumer behavior for reasons in addition to being healthy; most frequently these involved shopping locally or at farmer’s markets and supporting local, organic agriculture. Even in those cases, though, content consistently reinforced the idea that making eco-friendly lifestyle
changes would be easy, quick, painless, and fun. Britney Thomas (*The Pistachio Project*) writes that she is “on a mission to find simple eco-friendly changes that will really make a difference!” Lindsay G. (*So Easy Being Green*) says that her objective is to share a “message of making small, easy changes to go green” and describes herself as a “just a simple, Southern Mom dedicated to showing the world that being a mainstream green family can be easy!”

Generally, this positive outlook reads as harmless cheerleading, encouraging readers to see green domesticity as a way of living that is within their reach. For example, Carissa’s content is unfailingly upbeat, tending to stress the efficacy of behavioral changes that she frames as simple and effective. Many of the posts on *Creative Green Living* are tutorials offering guidance on DIY practices like sewing, gardening, and gluten-free cooking (noticeably absent from the last category: any discussion about rationale for pursuing a gluten-free diet). These are generally non-controversial topics, describing projects as enjoyable and not particularly labor intensive. Carissa also often invokes health-focused claims, such as cautioning readers about the danger of Teflon-coated cooking pans or the presence of endocrine disrupters (“they mess with your hormones!”) in sunscreen. Again, these warnings are generally not divisive or polemic and they tend to make reasonable – though commodity-focused – recommendations (the post about cookware included three links to a Pampered Chef consultant site).

The simple steps approach leverages individualism rather than collective concern and is dominated by market logic, even in cases where the bloggers suggest that readers forgo buying products and opt to make their own. Sarah at *Nature’s Nurture* emphasizes that she prefers to take the DIY option whenever possible, a practice that would seem to discourage consumption. However, a recipe post with instructions for making a non-toxic, vinegar-based floor cleaner – a recipe that requires only five ingredients, one of which is water – includes 12 affiliate links.
Presumably the average reader would be able to procure an item like distilled white vinegar, yet there is an affiliate link to an Amazon page where they can purchase 128 oz. (in other words, 2 gallon-sized jugs; the recipe calls for ½ cup) of Heinz Distilled White Vinegar (UmmYousef, n.d.). Similar to Carissa’s link to her pediatrician’s book, if an affiliate-link click results in a purchase, Sarah receives a small percentage of the revenue (which may explain the presence of an Amazon link for the Shark Steam Pocket Mop, listed price $79.99).

Occasionally, alongside DIY instructions and content promoting simple changes in behavior, bloggers offer opportunities to win the products that are featured in the posts. The giveaways are also framed as a convenience, a chance for readers to get the items that have been positively reviewed in the blog for free. Suggesting a chemical-free vegan soap concentrate, Aronica marvels at the ease of buying one product that can then be diluted in various ways to make several different cleaning solutions: “I’m all for doing things in an eco-friendly AND easy way (don’t forget the mom of 2 part, guys),” and “Yes people, it is possible for cleaning agents to be made WITHOUT using chemicals or synthetic ingredients! Amazing how Mother Earth thought of everything huh?” (Cole, 2016). Her casual tone and the implication that all one needs to do is trust the wisdom of “Mother Earth” is reinforced by a product giveaway at the end of the post: “Because I love you guys…be sure to enter and share – with those for whom you care!” The contest widget, Gleam, offers “one click entry” for readers once they have registered their social media accounts; that one click immediately creates a menu where users can subscribe to all the blogger’s social media accounts and get extra chances to win by referring their friends. But while the giveaway appears to cost readers nothing, requiring contestants to create an account through Facebook or Google facilitates the collection of personally identifiable
information, from the user and by default everyone in their contacts list or social network. The data, of course, becomes the property of Gleam (“Privacy Policy,” 2015).

The Personal is (Micro)political.

The marketing approach to eco-conscious lifestyle changes is generally rationalized by the claim that how consumers choose to spend their money amounts to a type of political expression. This idea is unequivocally espoused by Tiffany and Lisa F., who both say that “vot[ing] with our dollars” is a way to circumvent the corporate greed that has led to market deregulation and support companies that do value environmental responsibility. This consumer politics narrative, which situates activism in the private sphere, might be appealing to eco-conscious citizens for a variety of reasons. For some, conscientious consumerism is a direct expression of a sincere desire to help the environment while circumventing more traditional and collective forms of political action. Others may see such consumption as an integral part of the labor they already expend caring for loved ones (Cairns, de Laat, Johnston, & Baumann, 2014; Szasz, 2007).

When combined with more active strategies, targeted consumerism can certainly have a positive effect on corporate practices. Groovy Green Living author Lori A. educates her followers about the presence of harmful chemicals in mainstream products and encourages them to not just boycott but also start petitions and visit store managers to apply pressure in a more aggressive way. Along with Change.org and the advocacy group Women’s Voices for Earth, she was able to collect 78,000 signatures and successfully convince the multi-national conglomerate Proctor & Gamble (manufacturer of dozens of home and personal care products, including Tide,
NyQuil, and Tampax) to remove several carcinogenic and hormone-disrupting substances from all of their product lines (Alper, 2013).

Setting the rhetoric of targeted consumption aside, when “mundane” lifestyle practices like growing herbs, sewing clothes, and making one’s own baby food are imbued with political significance, their symbolic power is enhanced. Green domestic rhetoric positions the reclamation of traditionally feminine activities like knitting and embroidery as deliberately feminist acts of “anticorporate rebellion” (Matchar, 2013, p. 44). These activities thus function not only as performative elements of lifestyle and identity but also as markers of political commitment and distinction; they indicate the existence of cultural and political boundaries between people within the lifestyle group and those outside of it (Horton, 2003, p. 69). Lifestyle politics have recently undergone a rebranding of sorts, perhaps owing to the increasingly popular rhetoric of “maker culture” in the U.S. The logic of transforming socio-political problems into personal challenges where (commodified) solutions are devised through the creation of new products is rarely challenged – and occasionally valorized – by green domesticity bloggers. Proponents of the maker movement say that it will encourage individual citizens to “construct their own social realities, connections, and material aspects of living, and to take user-generated production as a key to an individual self-determination, knowledge sharing, and community building” (Bal, Nolan, & Seko, 2014, p. 158). This process, sometimes called DIY citizenship, is meant to foster self-determination and self-reflexive identity formation.

Traditional critiques dismiss lifestyle politics as a “personalistic retreat from previous forms of political action” that are ineffective as a means to achieve structural change because they are largely “enacted within the private sphere of consumption” (Portwood-Stacer, 2013, p. 5). Another common criticism is that when it is based on the assumption that the source of
complex social problems is individual irresponsibility rather than “unsustainable and unjust social and economic relationships,” activism comes to be viewed as a collection of individual duties or responsibilities rather than collectively-held rights (MacGregor, 2006, p. 115). Still other critics worry that lifestyle politics lead practitioners to feel as though they are sufficiently addressing immediate concerns, ultimately leading them into uncritical compliance with status quo state politics and corporate power – in other words, the “negative spillover” effect discussed earlier in the chapter (Lorenzen, 2014, p. 1069). And regarding the recent growth in maker culture as a potential avenue for political resistance, Ratto and Boler (2014) note that placing a high value on “‘doing it oneself’ sounds very much like “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps and results in a continued privileging of the individual,” which undercuts DIY citizenship as a threat to the neoliberal social ethos (p. 12).

On an apparently non-sponsored, non-compensated post about organic grocery shopping, blogger Lisa F. discussed the problematic pricing of “healthy real food” (i.e., organic and non-GMO).9 Acknowledging the existence of an “us/them” rift in which “most families in this country either can’t afford to feed their family this way or don’t have access to this quality of food,” she suggests shopping from local farms and co-ops to support chemical-free agriculture but also advocates stocking up on natural staples at Costco (Fennessy, 2018a). While saving money and having access to healthier, cleaner items was ostensibly the point of the post, she ultimately recounted a story in which she spent $350 and five hours shopping for bulk goods at the club store – an amount of time and money which might be out of reach for a less affluent family, who are also less likely to have the space to store large quantities of food. Lisa’s post further positions her family as being among the “haves” rather than the “have nots” when she

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9 The post still included affiliate links, even to some of the items that she reported buying at Costco.
jokingly criticizes upscale grocery chain Whole Foods (“7.99 for 2 cups of organic wild black rice? Bruh.”) but still declares “Siete wraps and Perfect Bars forever!” In other words, she may pay attention to cutting costs but not because she needs to.

To summarize critical theme located in such strategies, the focus on eco-consumption as a political tactic and lifestyle enhancement assumes both an individualist, neo-liberal form of social change, and a position of privilege. Lifestyle choices are rhetorically framed as politics, whereas community organizing and coalition building is downplayed or even invisible (with the exception of signing up for mailing lists and leaving comments on blog sites, discussed below). While the symbolism and status of green domestic lifestyle activities may have changed for the relatively affluent practitioners, that has not been the case for marginalized populations (Matchar, 2013, p. 41), who not only cannot afford Whole Foods prices, they may not have access to a Whole Foods near their neighborhoods.

“I Am Incredibly Lazy Glamorous”: Identity, Authenticity, and Self-Branding

Matchar (2013) points out that today’s lifestyle blogs “give us a historically unprecedented peek into strangers’ domestic lives,” and “even though we know better, we expect [bloggers] to portray life realistically…bloggers are supposed to be our friends” (p. 63). Idyllic images of happy children playing with home-crafted toys or startlingly clean chickens (see Figure 4.1) seem to be an honest depiction of green domesticity and encourage negative self-comparison. This phenomenon has been very adeptly deconstructed by several scholars (see, for example, Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014), and I do not wish to cover that already-familiar terrain here. Instead, I want to explore a less-analyzed topic: casual self-disclosure and narratives of imperfection as strategies of authenticity and self-branding. Both tactics use familiarity and
personal anecdotes to cultivate a disarming closeness between author and audience. This sense of genuine connection is a typical characteristic of lifestyle and wellness blogs, and can be a welcome alternative to the traditional expert advice model. However, in the selection of blogs I have looked at, these strategies often contribute to the discursive reinforcement of neoliberal values like self-reliant individualism and commodification.

**Friendly self-disclosure**

After typing an email address in exchange for a recipe guide and digital newsletter, visitors to *The Wellness Mama* click on a green and animated “ Heck Yes I’m In!” button that periodically gives an attention-grabbing shake. This effect, while admittedly a bit more twee than most, strikes a tone that is quite common across the green domesticity networked public. Many of the bloggers use language that implies familiarity, often punctuated with exclamation points and informal invitations to leave comments or sign up for email correspondence. The discursive style is a combination of plugging into something significant -- a sea change of lifestyle choices -- and making a new gal pal. Carissa urges readers to “join the tribe!”; Brittany says “let’s stay in touch!”; and nearly every blogger assures readers that they “love comments!” and would “love to hear from you!” Lisa F. explains that she is “passionate about making a change” but “need[s] your help. Let’s do this!” Upon signing up for Sarah U.’s newsletter, subscribers are transferred to a popup tab explaining how to confirm enrollment. Sarah signs off by saying “I’ll see you in your inbox! Peace and Blessings.”

In addition to creating a relatable and laid-back persona, these enthusiastic requests are of course designed to collect personal information that may be useful for various marketing and
web analytics, but seem like snippets of casual or even intimate conversation between friends rather than data collection. In fact, the subscriber lists bloggers generate in order to distribute electronic newsletters or updates are a valuable source of user data for email marketing companies like MailMunch, MailChimp, or Go Daddy (via their subsidiary Mad Mimi). For example, the seemingly ubiquitous service MailChimp manages to collect a surprising amount of detailed information from clients’ subscriber lists and tracking digital traffic, while only revealing vague details about how that data is used and how long they retain it. MailChimp data scientist John Foreman, in a 2014 GigaOm editorial with the reassuring title “You don’t want your data,” acknowledged that users might be “freaked out by the privacy implications of where all this is headed,” but dismissed those concerns by saying that giving up data increases enjoyment, comfort, and convenience. While many of the pop-up squeeze pages, which greet first-time visitors to roughly half the bogs in my sample, include small-print disclaimers about privacy (e.g., “We will never sell your email address!” or “Don’t worry, we hate spam too!”), this does not pertain the email automation platforms, which have their own lengthy terms of service (TOS) agreements. These apps put the responsibility of disclosing data collection on the bloggers themselves, an obligation which the majority of them do not meet. In MailChimp’s TOS agreement, which blog readers passively agree to when they enter email addresses into squeeze page boxes, the company reserves the right to “transfer Personal Information of you or your Subscribers to companies that help us promote, provide, or support our Services or the services of our Members.”

\[10\text{In the same editorial Foreman was quick to point out that while giving up information to businesses benefits internet users, collection of voluntary or passive data by the government is bad. His rationale for this claim is based in market logic, specifically that government agencies like the National Security Administration have been unable to “sell us on “terrorism prevention”” because “most people don’t experience that benefit in a visceral way.”}\]
In addition to email services, most bloggers use comment plugins. The most common of these, Disqus, generates revenue by collecting both personally identifiable and non-personally identifiable information, which they combine “in order to provide [users] with relevant advertising when visiting or using [their] Service, Partner Sites, and third party websites” (“Disqus Privacy Policy,” 2017). Much like MailChimp, Disqus states that they “are not responsible for the practices employed by websites linked to or from” their service, meaning that the blogs with Disqus-managed comment sections are expected to inform commenters about collection and use of information. None of the blogs in my sample did so. Thus the authors’ cheery comment solicitations, while conveying relatability and accessibility, distract their visitors from the weak privacy policies favored by interactive support platforms.

Narratives of imperfection

Contemporary lifestyle media flourish within the tension caused by rising expectations (“having it all”) and neoliberal post-welfare strategies of individualism and responsibilization (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011). But unlike makeover television programs or self-help books, the green domestic networked public is not dominated by a one-way flow model of communication in which expertise is transmitted through media texts from author to audience. Rather than taking an authoritative or absolutist stance, much of the bloggers’ messaging seems to focus on offering support and leading by example. The authoritative expert is thus replaced with a “lifestyle influencer” who engages her readers in circuital conversation and addresses them as peers.

In digital communities where green domestic lifestyle practices are discussed, content creators and other participants have succeeded to some extent in de-centralizing the construction and dissemination of expert knowledge by sharing experiences and discussing lifestyle practices
as politicized decisions, at least partially circumventing the expertise-gatekeeper model that perpetuates the commodification of knowledge (Banet-Weiser & Gray, 2009). Ouellette and Wilson (2011) are tentatively optimistic about this shift, which is based on belief in “women’s capacities to empower themselves independently of traditional experts (psychiatrists, social workers, [and] doctors)” (p. 556). I discussed earlier how one thread in the blogs is a distrust of health-related institutions such as western medicine and government regulatory agencies. In some ways, this distrust is also extended to themselves: in their self descriptions, they are not officially credentialed authorities. Meghann, author of Simple Green Moms, directly disavows the “expert” label, assuring her audience that she is “learning new things every day” in order to share simple solutions to common “meal time dilemmas.” Know-how in this setting is based on lived experience (often including trial-and-error) and validated by popularity and visibility, rather than being authorized by social institutions like schools, mainstream media, or government (Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

However, they do rhetorically construct themselves as (non-official) authorities for a greener, healthier lifestyle by appealing to empowerment that the bloggers implicitly model for others (and imply in their discourse). When describing their motivations for maintaining green domestic blogs, the authors in my sample universally express a desire to share, educate, and help. Lindsey G. started So Easy Being Green to act as “as a resource for parents who wanted to make small changes that would make a big impact on a better world and their family.” Lisa B. hopes that Downshiftology will be a source of inspiration for readers who want to start their own “wellness journey” and understand “balance.” The bloggers’ relationship to and construction of their authority is therefore complicated. Despite discursively positioning themselves as trustworthy figures and reliable sources of information and expertise, several of the women are
emphatic about their failures and use humility and modesty to connect with readers and reinforce their authenticity. Even for leaders in the green domestic public sphere, sharing stories about experiencing occasional failures in homemaking is a common practice (generally these stories are generally softened by accompanying words of encouragement). Many of these stories focus on anxiety about motherhood. Shannon Hayes, the *Radical Homemaker* who has been a source of inspiration for many women who practice green domesticity, published a post detailing ten ways in which she believed herself to be a failure as a mother. Included in the list were such transgressions as allowing her daughters to eat candy bars, use shampoo, and visit Disneyland. One of her failures was at “natural infant hygiene,” which refers to the “intuitive” practice of forgoing diapers altogether because a mother should “simply know” when her newborn needed to go (to her credit, Hayes does seem to flinch at her own description of this particular expectation). The post ends with her musing, “Maybe I haven’t gotten this parenting thing quite right…but there’s still hope for the future” (Hayes, 2015).

Writing about the “illusion of perfect parenting,” Lacey M. recognizes that “society expects perfection but it doesn’t exist” (Mackey, 2015). She says that when she was adjusting to life as a mother of two, after the birth of her second son, she “seemed perfectly put together, but felt overwhelmed…I had always considered myself a strong person [who could] persevere through life’s many challenges.” The idea that feeling overwhelmed in the face of change is a sign of individual weakness is a subtext in Lacey’s post, and although she criticizes the omnipresent “images of perfect parenting” her blog is filled with images of her family in a pristine kitchen, at the farmers market (see Figure 4.1), or cuddling on a spotless white duvet. Although the words in her post seem to take an almost confessional tone, what seems to matter
the most is that outer appearance of perfectly-put-togetherness, a calm serenity that she describes as “perfectly imperfect.”

“Most days I am a glorious disaster,” writes Stephanie Anderson on Confessions of a Stay at Home Mom, but “being a screw-up around other people is much more funny than screwing up alone.” Cultivating this sense of camaraderie-through-shortcoming is a frequent strategy. Stephanie describes herself as an aspiring “modern-day Donna Reed,” but says that she started her blog to “share [her] fumbling experiences at parenthood” and “laughable attempts at being a domestic goddess.” While her posts are meant to be funny (and frequently are), Stephanie’s use of words like disaster and screw-up subtly reinforce the idea that “women simply cannot win; inevitably, they will always ‘fail’” even though – or perhaps because – her tone is light and jokey (Gill, 2007, p. 157). Stories that are meant to be relatable and show the bloggers as “average” women are consistently predicated on the idea that “real women” are unable to meet the cultural expectations that we have all been socialized to understand even if we

Figure 4.1 Natureal Mom, from a photoessay entitled "As We Are."
reject their ideology. Posts that promise to meet these expectations head-on are rare, but even attempts to challenge hegemonic expectations can end up reinforcing them.

In a post about common sexist questions that women face, Aronica repeatedly disavows patriarchal thinking and then reinforces it a sentence later. Fielding an inquiry about who she feeds first, Aronica says “What. The. Entire. F-bomb. Listen, if I just slaved over this hot ass stove the first plate I’m fixing is my own!” but then quickly confesses, that she fixes her kids’ plates first and then serves her husband so she can “make sure that he gets the most food” (Cole, 2017). Certainly, humor is a way to blunt the sharply regressive edges of social pressure based on outdated gender roles, but the jokes generally do not aim to expose the expectations as ridiculous. There is room in the green domestic networked public to “[interrogate] femininity or social relations, or what we as a society expect of women,” but what the self-deprecating anecdotes actually do is show the women themselves as coming up short (Gill, 2007, p. 157).

In any case, stories of the bloggers’ occasional failures at motherhood serve several rhetorical functions: they create common ground with blog readers, noting that the problems other mothers face, they face as well; they often add humor to perhaps break up other, more anxiety provoking posts about poisons in the home and such; and, perhaps most important, they enhance the importance of their green lifestyle as central to their roles as a good mom. They may burn dinner, but in the big picture, they are fulfilling their role as a responsible mother by challenging larger dangers to their kids by promoting green consumption.
Writing Here Helps Me Remember

One last way that the image of authenticity and confessional tone sometimes converge is when bloggers liken their sites to a personal curation project or emphasize the blogs’ documentary function by likening them to photo album or journal, often tied to remembering key moments in their parenting. In such cases, the women seem to be pulling the readers into their own private experience of motherhood and domestic life, with the implication that the work of maintaining a blog site and several associated social media profiles is something that they do selfishly. But blogs are businesses, and sometimes even serve as the hub for a network of businesses, that the authors create with profits in mind.

On Soule Mama, Amanda Blake Soule calls blogging “a silly little ridiculous joy-addiction that feeds itself,” and “one of the ways [she] gets through [her] days.” To her readers, she says: “Thank you, friends, for joining me on this ride.” Soule Mama has been around for 13 years as of 2018 (an eternity in blog time). Many of Amanda’s posts result in well over a thousand comments. Matchar (2013) describes the blog as “living inside an impressionist painting,” and Soule herself as the sort of person who “you can just tell [is] a nicer person than you” (p. 63). This sort of recognition has generated dozens of brand ambassadorships, five book deals, and allowed her to start Taproot, a “quarterly magazine for makers, doers, and dreamers.”

One post from March 2018 referenced its long history. She explains that she is accompanying her son on his visits to college as he decides where to attend, and her tone is wistful:

I hear the senior year is one long goodbye, and I think we're all ready for that. He's ready.

I can't wait to see what he does. But before all that, we do have a whole year to be
together, and these trips have been such a great way to spend time alone, connecting as near-adults, and having long conversations in the car.

She ends her post with a photo of her son as a young child, barefoot on a skateboard: “And just for good measure, to kick off what is sure to be a sentimental year for this Mama, I leave you with this....the first appearance of this fella on the blog, exactly thirteen years ago. Oh time....”

The example that opens this chapter -- of Carissa’s “miracle baby” – is detailed in a two-part blog post that the blogger confesses she didn’t write and post until her son was older. She notes, though, that this is unusual for such blogs: “On the eve of my son's fourth birthday I realized I never wrote up and shared a traditional "birth story" for him. This is kind of surprising as it's a pretty customary thing for green bloggers to do.” For her next child, however, “I’m planning to write all about New Baby’s birth story when he arrives in a few weeks.”

Explaining why she started The Sparkle Nest, Rebecca calls her blog “a way of remembering this crazy, love fueled, drool covered journey” of early parenthood, which evolved into her “happiness journal” and “creative outlet about the joys in life.” Holding onto memories of her boys as toddlers and sharing musings about the things that make her happy are both self-oriented behaviors, serving an individualistic purpose. Such declarations of purpose about documenting the growth of a family again work to build common ground as the blog is seen as a kind of social media photo-album shared among friends. However, it may also distract from the economic realities of the blogs. As with many bloggers, Rebecca also offers her services as a brand ambassador, indicates a willingness to post sponsored reviews (perhaps she “could host a giveaway for [her] readers”?), and repeatedly directs readers to her Etsy shop, Bliss Botanicals.
Conclusion

This chapter focused on the personas of green moms as reflected in their blogs. They are first and foremost mothers, but ones who see the world as a scary place where authorities have not done enough to protect their kids (or, worse, are bribed not to). They see consumption as a political act, confess their flaws, and document their progress (or setbacks) as parents. We see contradictions of an emphasis on green living, but one that can be accomplished through consumption (facilitated by links on their website). The next chapter focuses more on philosophies of wellness that are emphasized in the blogs. Building on the green domestic lifestyle that I have explored in this chapter, what are the lessons that the authors, through their narratives and lifestyle choices, teach about pursuing wellness and the nature of caring for self, family, and home?
CHAPTER FIVE: THE NEVERENDING JOURNEY TO WELLNESS:
POSTFEMINIST DISCOURSES OF EMBODIMENT AND AGENCY

I don’t proclaim to be 100% crunchy. I don’t believe anyone can be 100% crunchy.

I am on a journey to becoming crunchier.

- Brittany, *The Pistachio Project*

I’m a hippie. Ha! Whoops! I thought you knew! I mean, I can see how this comes as a surprise. There are no dreadlocks to be had around these parts. No tie dye or incense, no subtle wafts of patchouli.

- Madeline Somerville, *Sweet Madeline*

The previous chapter began by exploring the most commonly offered reasons for starting green domesticity blogs, particularly motherhood, physical health, and household safety. Many bloggers rhetorically marked a clear threshold between their previous lifestyles and present commitments. These moments, which were variously presented as points of rupture or realization or awakening, marked the adoption of a new value system based on the pursuit of eco-friendly living and mindful domestic practices. As noted in the previous chapter, the point of change might have taken the form of childbirth, a health scare, or a realization that consumer markets are insufficiently regulated and many immediate-vicinity products are toxic in some way. After sharing their authors’ transformative moments, every one of the 25 blogs in my study began to build a discourse of wellness as a journey. Thus conceived, wellness becomes a projected state
that one can work toward but not fully reach, a continuous lifestyle project that requires investment and reinvestment of labor, time, and financial resources.

This chapter focuses on narratives of those journeys in green domestic blogs, and what the neverending road to wellness means for how we conceive of “true health” and the various ways to advance along its path. In their descriptions of transformations, often agency is discursively located within the individual, or within the practice of green consumption. Three prevalent themes are considered: neoliberal domestic femininity, postfeminist discourses of choice as empowerment, and the way that labor is both made visible and rhetorically minimized by the bloggers in my study. In all three themes, then, we see ideological contradictions that highlight the tricky landscape of these bloggers and their messages as gender, environmentalism, privilege, and social media collide.

“We’re Always Learning and Growing”: The Ongoing Affective Labor of Natural Living

In the green domestic networked public, health and wellness are framed as processes rather than settled states. Language literally invoking a “journey” or describing “a path” to true health is common, and women are expected to undertake this voyage on behalf of their families as well as themselves. Lori A., for instance, acknowledges that the “green journey” is not always easy: “I’ve been on a ‘green’ journey for many years, trying to live a healthy, toxin-free life. I know firsthand that it’s challenging at times. I’m doing my best to walk the walk, but many times I fall short. That’s part of the journey.” This narrative not only reinforces the idea of eco-friendly wellness and domesticity as an ongoing project but also integrates the distinctly neoliberal and postfeminist discourse of physical and mental personal responsibilities (i.e., “I fall short”). In their role(s) as wives or mothers, women are expected to assume a position of
guardianship over of rest of their family, actively making choices to improve not just their own health, but their loved ones as well (Barnett, 2006). All neoliberal citizens are expected to “work on themselves” continuously but for women, that “self-work is simultaneously other-directed, applied on behalf of spouses and children as well” (Ouellette & Wilson, 2011, p. 556).

Gill (2008) argues that postfeminist media culture revolves around requiring women to accept the idea that “they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way” in order to redeem themselves through modifications to their lifestyle or consumption behavior (p. 441). This narrative, which McRobbie (2010) identifies as a “makeover paradigm,” encourages reinvention in the name of personal empowerment. This process is representative of governmentality, which frames power not as a top-down force but rather something more dispersed and dynamic. Ouellette and Hay (2008) identify self-improvement and the discursive pressure to “make over” as a type of “government of the self” (p. 476). In both Gill’s (2008) and Ouellette and Hay’s (2008) articles, reality television is identified as the dominant technology of citizenship, but ten years later that function has been at least partially supplanted by another source of makeover advice: the network of digital lifestyle media. These authors “demonstrate what happens when the self [becomes] a project of continuous labor” and reinforce the results of that project “in the social media age” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 4). The prevalence of the wellness journey narrative in the green domestic networked public reinforces the makeover paradigm but with a new twist: essentially, the makeover (of one’s home, body, and mental health) never ends.

**Neoliberal domestic femininity**

As concepts of “self” and “family” converge into a single, stable site of social reproduction and self-enterprising citizenship, Gill (2007) notes that the autonomous
postfeminist subject is, coincidentally, the perfect neoliberal subject. Ouellette and Wilson (2011) explain this connection by saying that postfeminist discourse reconstitutes domestic labor and the pursuit of wellness as a “self-‘empowering’ activity – making the feminized labour of caring for others more compatible with the self-enterprising ethos demanded by today’s neoliberal polices and reforms” (p. 555). This is perhaps made most obvious when green domesticity bloggers offer tips for having a natural, non-toxic pregnancy (a topic that was present in slightly over half of the blogs).

Nadia N., in a post titled “The Missing Link in Maternal Health: Non-Toxic Self-Care” (emphasis added) repeatedly equates caring for oneself as protecting the fetus. Clearly, the physical wellbeing of mother and in utero baby is literally a single site, but the discursive construction of a woman’s obligation during this time is exclusively as a protector of her “teeny tiny, developing baby” who is “more vulnerable to the effects” of chemicals in food and personal care products. Tiffany W. acknowledges that being pregnant is nerve-wracking enough without “scaring moms-to-be” during this “special, magical time.” However, she immediately goes on to say that “…the high incidences of autism, asthma, allergies, ADHD, cancer, and so many other childhood illnesses and issues require us to give some thought to raising our children green and healthy, even before they are born.” (emphasis added). She also argues that “You [as a pregnant woman] are now responsible for the healthy development of another human life and everything you eat, breathe, and come into contact with for the next nine months can impact that growth and development” (emphasis added; Washko, 2013). This implication of a causal relationship is unsupported by medical research but the narrative effectively positions the mother as singular protector of fetal health.
However, pregnancy is not the only aspect of health that the individual has both agency and responsibility. In a post about mental health, Scarlet Paolicchi *(Family Focus Blog)* offers these words of encouragement: “[Y]ou’re smart. You’re hard working…And *everything you have, you achieved* because you’re a determined, bright and confident person” (emphasis added; Paolicci, 2013). In another post she tells readers that they can “rid [their] life of negative thoughts and unhealthy behavior” through a “7 Day Detox Diet.” She goes on to say that “making changes isn’t always easy so just try making one change a day [and] watch how it adds up!” (Paolicchi, 2018). Unlike the detoxifying cleanses discussed in Chapter Four, Scarlet’s plan includes fostering mental health – “try positivity” and “practice gratitude” (“starting your day by being grateful for at least 20 things”) – and overcoming the laziness that prevents readers from following an exercise routine (“Many people find that they are too busy or too lazy for an exercise routine”). Other tips focus on creating agency, in a language that mirrors both self-help and postfeminist themes of empowerment: “Take Some Me Time,” “Say No,” and “Avoid The People That Pull You Down.”

The narrative of investing labor into mental health is commodified when Scarlet concludes with a somewhat surprising, but ideologically consistent, endorsement for Crest Gum Detoxify toothpaste, a conventional product containing fluoride (a substance that she cautions against in a review for Tom’s of Maine oral care products). Below a photo of her brushing her teeth with the conspicuously placed product, she declares: “Crest Gum Detoxify Deep Clean Toothpaste” has an activated foam formula that penetrates hard to reach places and neutralizes harmful plaque bacteria for clinically proven healthier gums.” This language could easily be interpreted as her words but in fact is taken word-for-word from the Crest website. Embedded in this post are two links to buy this version of Crest: from crest.com, and from Walmart.
(Incidentally, Scarlet has not met the FTC’s sponsorship disclosure requirement in two ways: first, the only disclaimer appears at the top of the post instead of in a “clear and prominent” location by the photos; and second, by not clarifying that some of the text was copied from the corporate website.) The “detoxified” self, then, can be self-actualized both through will power (be positive; don’t be lazy), and through brand acquisition. Thus, as Gill (2008) suggests in her interrogation of postfeminism, “making over” one’s mental state is discursively associated with lifestyle modifications as well as correct consumption behaviors.

**Beauty standards and bodily discipline: Green Glow**

Managing the safety of things that go on your body is part of the inverted quarantine trifecta (as explained in Chapter Three), so the inclusion of cosmetics and personal care products in green lifestyle blogs is unsurprising. Careful management of physical appearance and hygiene is not a new requirement. These have been expected behaviors for women for generations and over time we have even internalized the “social constructed ideals of beauty or sexiness” to such an extent that they are “felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours” (Gill, 2008, p. 436). However, the postfeminist sensibility includes reframing the pursuit of beauty ideals as an opportunity for female pampering or even as an indulgence, a freely chosen and therefore empowering practice (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2010). In the green domestic networked public, these standards are repositioned once more as self-care or wellness, and therefore become part of the lifestyle commitments that eco-conscious and “balanced” women eagerly embrace.

Suzi S. assures readers that she is “not one of those granola eating, no makeup wearing chicks! On the contrary, I still wear makeup, love experimenting with my hair and love being girly.” Femininity is subtly associated with being concerned about outer appearance, but Suzi also emphasizes that green beauty is “silly” unless practiced alongside “eating clean, and living
clean.” In another post, she describes conventional facial masks as “serious toxic junk” and says that users of these “carcinogenic masks” will find that “their hormones are all messed up” (Swope, 2015). Going on to review several “clean masks,” she shifts away from health-based considerations and instead focuses on aesthetic results such as reducing skin redness, minimizing wrinkles, and achieving “that lit from within glow.” In her first sentence, she mixes values of green (coded here as “clean”), pampering oneself at a spa, the “glow” of the skin and the reminder of ever-present motherhood: “I’m kind of obsessed with clean masks, but for good reason. They make my skin feel moisturized, revived…oh and let’s not forget the glow I get too! Plus, masking is like having my own mini spa session, while in the comfort of my own home (a big deal when you’re a mama).” The narrative of beauty and physical self-surveillance as wellness-seeking behaviors is tangled with more traditional expectations about looking good.

Writing about May Lindstrom skincare products, which are “made from the purest organic, biodynamic and/or wildcrafted ingredients,” Lacey M. says that using a product designed to “smooth fine lines” and give her a skin “dewy, radiant glow” is a “practice [of] self-care” (Mackey, 2016). The post also describes skin imperfections such as eczema and acne as a side effect of being “out of balance.” Thus, the standard beauty ideal of maintaining blemish-free, youthful skin is reinforced while being made into a wellness-seeking behavior. Describing her experience using the Youth Dew serum she says, “Gently, I apply it to my face (adding an extra drop around my eyes to hydrate and smooth fine lines) and envision my skin returning to its natural rhythm and state of perfect health, like May suggests.” Lacey’s praise for the non-toxic composition of the serum that can “smooth fine lines” return skin to “its natural rhythm” further underlines the implication that appearance is a secondary consideration to health and purity, but active management of both is expected.
Truth is: I feel unpretty

As the above posts suggest, mental and emotional health are tied to physical wellbeing. This is true for not just maintaining a wellness space, but also turning around a negative space. And such turnarounds can be done either through individual agency or the power of the right purchase. In an emotional post, Aronica C. shares the moment when she “found [herself] just angry all the time and hating everything” and realized that she had been feeling self-directed anger and loathing (Cole, 2016a). Looking the mirror, she was unable to see anything other than physical “flaws,” and had experienced a drop in blog-related sponsorships. Furthermore, she saw her patience with her daughters becoming strained and felt rejected by her mother. In her words, she had “let herself go” not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well, and was overcome by disappointment. The post conveys a sense of vulnerability and rawness, heightened further by a color-filtered and no-smile selfie framed by the words “The day I stopped hating myself” (see Figure 4.1). The authenticity and realness in her writing would unquestionably seem relatable to many stressed-out and exhausted mothers who face similarly high expectations with regard to appearance, parenthood, and domestic perfection.

Aronica is clearly trying to share a positive message with readers. Ultimately, though, she directs the blame back at herself, saying that “I haven’t been giving 100% at the gym. I haven’t been 100% with my nutrition. I haven’t been 100% with my business.” Rather than validating the presence of negative feelings or exploring the topic of mental health, she determines that the problem is her own lack of initiative and lack of self-control: “I woke up the other day and decided to stop hating myself and am actively loving me and the life I’ve created.” This is particularly concerning because recent clinical research suggests that as many as 1 in 7 women
experience postpartum depression, a rate which doubles for mothers who, like Aronica, are women of color (CDC, 2017; Gambini, 2016).

Figure 5-1: Narratives of self-empowerment: Aronica Bell Cole and Lisa Fennessy

Taking a much more upbeat, if commodified, approach, Lisa F. models a t-shirt that reads “Your vibe attracts your tribe” in a post that encourages readers to “Find [their] true north at W.E.L.L. Summit” (Fennessy, 2018b; see Figure 4.1). Rather than sharing a personal story, she describes the experience of a friend who, after attending the Wellness, Empowerment, Learning and Luxury Summit with the blogger, hired a personal trainer and found “clarity” that “shed a light on the less-than choices she didn’t even realize she was making.” Thus empowered, the
friend “left a life partner, made new friends, moved and is currently up for an amazing new job.” For $179 plus the cost of travel to Boston, attendees of W.E.L.L have the chance to meet and attend “networking parties” with lifestyle influencers, clean beauty gurus, and fitness experts. The event’s similarity to Gwyneth Paltrow’s annual Goop Health Summit is unmistakable, particularly as both advocate holistic or New Age approaches to “wellness” and happen to be sponsored by an array of trendy and expensive lifestyle brands that helpfully offer to help in that pursuit.

Lisa promises a life-changing and cathartic experience that will involve talks on everything from improving one’s skin using green beauty techniques to rocking Instagram and generally celebrating “girl badassery.” Lisa then reveals that like her friend, she herself benefited from her first time at W.E.L.L. three years earlier: “I was meeting people who were making a difference, building my green beauty/green living network and putting a fire in my belly that would soon ignite into This Organic Girl blog. (See!? It kinda happened to me too!).” She concludes by repeating that this event is transformative: “This year I am bringing two of my besties from Boston and I can’t wait to see what unfolds.”

The postfeminist compulsory self-improvement narrative, common in lifestyle media like green domestic blogs, can “reinvigorate class antagonisms;” in neoliberal culture class is no longer based on “such “crude” categories as occupation or social location, but play out on the women’s bodies, homes, [and] ability as mothers” (Gill, 2008, p. 442). Although they take different tones and address different topics, both Lisa and Aronica are promoting a discourse of self-sufficiency and active engagement with the wellness journey: one through sheer willpower and bodily discipline, the other through a for-profit event that assumes a certain class status. This
narrative “underpins the neoliberal notion of individual responsibility, which conveniently glides over structural discrimination” (Thornton, 2015, p. 51).

**Domesticity and Choice Feminism: Flexible Empowerment**

The postfeminist “notion that all our practices are freely chosen” has, according to Gill (2007), led to discourse that “present[s] women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances” (p. 153). This neoliberal and “flexible” model of feminism posits that any individual decision made by a woman may be celebrated as inherently feminist, which allows women to sidestep some of the critical self-reflection that might be attached to “older” or “institutional” models of feminism (Hollows, 2005). For millennial women especially who have been exposed to sexualized pop culture and celebrity-sourced messages about the meaning of feminism, this idea seems to have a certain sort of comforting resonance. Second-wave feminism, with its focus on challenging traditional political institutions, seems “cumbersome, old-fashioned and essentialist” by comparison (Thornton, 2015, p. 44). Lindsay D., one of the more explicitly political bloggers in my study, criticizes what she sees as an “outdated definition of feminism and femininity” – as articulated by Elinor Burkett in a *New York Times* op-ed – as exclusionary, essentialist, and sex-negative (Dahl, 2015). She asks: rather than rejecting sexualized self-objectification, “shouldn’t it be up to *us* to decide what *our* femininity is?” Aronica C. constructs a similar idea in a series of posts about “Embracing Womanhood,” which encourage women to “let it go” and “shoot their shot” rather than considering how ideological structures (like domestic gender roles or a political atmosphere that she describes as “a clusterf---”) that might constrain their ability to “just be themselves” and focus on being thankful for what they have been able to (individually) accomplish (Cole, 2016b).
The presence or absence of agency is of course relevant in the choice discourse: is a woman’s self-presentation and definition of “feminine” motivated by her own desire to feel good, or by socially constructed neoliberal/postfeminist expectations? According to Gill (2007), this is not an either/or question because denying that our choices can feel freely-chosen while still being influenced by the constraints of patriarchy reinforces neoliberal responsibilization, but conceding that such an influence exists can helpfully illuminate governmentality. Autonomous feminine agency is resituated as a part of the discursive formation and maintenance of power, yet still in negotiation with preexisting sexist ideology.

Exploring this negotiation, Katherine Cross points out in a 2015 post on the feminist pop-culture blog Feministing that women need to be mindful of how the range of choices made available to them may be restrained. She writes:

A woman who quits her job after bearing a child, for example, may be “making her own choice,” but a society where there is no guarantee of parental leave, where workplaces remain hostile to pregnant women and new mothers, and where our conception of the ideal worker is still inherited from a 1950’s male breadwinner model all make that choice considerably easier for her to make. (Cross, 2015, para. 4)

Similarly, Bulbeck (2010) points out that the very concept of choice with regard to career or domestic pursuit is “gender-marked.” Since we (still) rarely hear discussion of men having choices between these two paths, the point of offering such a choice to women underlines the prevalent belief that it is their unique responsibility to make it. Perhaps the choice discourse has facilitated the repackaging of an old model of gender norms in feminist activist rhetoric. This new (post)feminist label then gives women the space and permission to re-inhabit regressive subjectivities structured by nostalgia, outdated definitions of domestic labor, and the stricture of
traditional beauty ideals and bodily discipline, and furthermore to label them as feminine empowerment (Gill, 2010; Faludi, 1991).

For the remainder of the chapter, I will focus on discourse related to the journey of being a blogger: the benefits to them, the rejection of conventional work and education, and the luxury they have of being devoted to simplifying their life and embracing a green lifestyle. In much of this discourse, themes of empowerment and choice are intertwined with these benefits.

Invoking the discourse of choice, Scarlet P. explains her decision to leave full-time employment and become a stay-at-home mother: “I loved retail but when I had kids, I knew that working nights and weekends was no longer for me.” She goes on to say that blogging in addition to parenting gives her a liberating sense of creative fulfillment:

Blogging became a creative outlet for me and a way of building something that was just mine. It is so easy to become known as Daniel’s wife or Leo’s mom and it felt good having my own thing and having people know me for my work too. Did I mention I love work? I love staying busy with things I enjoy so becoming a blogger has been so gratifying for me.

The preoccupation with being free to label any chosen behavior as empowerment – such as “building something that was just mine” and escaping a pure “mom” identity -- “sits well with neoliberal individualism that gives primacy to ‘choice’ ahead of all other political dictums” (Genz, 2008, p. 58). This can hide the fact that choosing to pursue green domesticity as a full-time vocation is not a universal option because income inequality effectively excludes families below a certain economic threshold. But economic inequity is only one way that specific family models are valorized while others are marginalized.
Doing what matters most

Of the 25 blogs I examined, 14 are written or co-written by women who specifically identify themselves as stay-at-home-moms (SAHMs) and 11 more have authors – also all mothers – who do not have full-time waged employment outside of the home. Those in the second group pursue flexible work opportunities, sometimes related to their work as bloggers – writing for other publications, copyediting, or consulting with other aspiring lifestyle influencers – and sometimes as holistic health practitioners, work that reflects their identity as green domestic moms. Three of the women do not have children; one of them (Lindsay Dahl, who writes an eponymous blog) is a professional environmental activist, and the other, Lisa Brian from *Downshiftology*, who does occasional work as a health coach but mostly focuses on her work as a blogger. Since over 90% of the sample is content created by mothers who do not work in a traditional outside-the-home job, it is hardly surprising that the content they create tends to focus on the experiences of SAHMs (although Aronica C. identifies herself as a work at home mom, or WAHM, as does Stephanie Anderson, whose blog is then somewhat confusingly titled *Confessions of a Stay at Home Mom*).

However, even though most of the women describe having full-time jobs before they became mothers there is little acknowledgement regarding the fact that some women do work outside the home, and that working mothers may face a very different set of challenges. Posts that share tips about parenthood, crafting, and other household endeavors could easily recognize and mention that the advice they provide might need to be modified to fit eco-motivated mothers with more restrictive schedules or less time to devote to domesticity. The effect of such an omission does not necessarily position stay-at-home mothers as *better than* those who are
employed outside the home; instead, it constructs a narrative in which exclusively domestic motherhood is the only motherhood. Potential limitations are occasionally even dismissed as invalid. In a post about the importance of “cooking from scratch,” Tiffany D. frames her discussion in the journey metaphor, presenting a before and after of not being “in touch with my food choices”:

I’ll admit I haven’t always been a believer in the scratch method. When I got married I marveled at the 15 dishes I could make from cans of cream of mushroom soup. I was a can opening, box ripping, pull it from the freezer kind of wife. To be completely truthful, I didn’t even think it was a big deal. I figured I was cooking instead of us going through a drive through…But as I’ve gotten older and more in touch with my food choices I see the amazing benefits of cooking from scratch. Nothing pleases me more than cooking things I’ve grown or raised myself; but that’s beside the point. (Davis, 2017)

She responds to the idea that making every meal without “convenience foods” – which she defines as anything that comes in a can or box – is challenging because it takes a significant time commitment, she responds: “to that I say, wait, you’ll fall in love with it and the time won’t matter.” This is a relatively easy argument to make when you are able to start your day, as she does, at 4:00 a.m. and are fully dedicated to domestic and homestead-related duties; however, schedules that include working a full day outside the home might be a bit more cramped. Perhaps to soften the suggestion, Tiffany ends the post by encouraging readers to “be kind to” themselves, because opening “a can of store-bought tomatoes instead of one you canned yourself…isn’t the end of the world.” However, invoking the narrative of wellness as journey, she goes on to suggest: “Build upon your one meal, once a week until you’re doing every meal
that way. Then you’ll probably find your own reasons that you love this way of preparing meals.”

Reclaiming the domestic

In celebrating the domestic revival and the reappearance of the housewife figure, millennial domestic feminism sees the domestic sphere as a space of female subjectivity where young women have the freedom to reinterpret the homemaker character as “a polysemic character caught in a struggle between tradition and modernity,” and to connect their nostalgia for a more authentic era with sophisticated awareness of a thoroughly modern set of political problems (Genz, 2008, p. 50). Green domestic femininity (which is overwhelmingly constructed as a postfeminist identity in this networked public) is comprised of a series of lifestyle choices – particularly those related to consumption – “through which fractured middle-class identities are formed” (Hollows, 2005, p. 99).

Voluntary simplicity – being less materialistic and less reliant on mainstream, mass-produced consumer goods – is frequently listed as a goal. For example, Tiffany W. regularly posts about applying the principles of minimalism to everything from childrearing to wedding planning. Minimalist living spaces are featured in both Lisa B.’s and Madeline S.’s blogs, and Rebecca advises readers to “declutter” and give away non-essential items. In a virtual tour of her home, Madeline S. describes her approach to voluntary simplicity, which includes not having a television and filling a house with secondhand goods. This idea is repeated in her book, when she describes that voluntary simplicity as “perhaps the most important aspect of any environmental movement: reducing conspicuous consumption, reducing useless stuff” (Somerville, 2014, p. 2). However, even this simpler way of living requires at least some small measures of privilege,
such as having a close-knit social support system (much of her secondhand furniture came free from her mother and several other items were either made or gifted to her by family and friends) or time and geographic access (finding the right secondhand furniture takes longer and local resale shops tend to thrive in hip urban neighborhoods).

Such “downshifting” behavior tends to be performative and thus represents a sort of conspicuous lack of consumption, based on a “profoundly classed narrative” in which time and affective labor must be traded for consumption. In this domestic model, rather than focusing on the time- and labor-saving conveniences of innovative appliances, many of the women reclaiming and valorizing the idea that hands-on, more labor-intensive, DIY approaches to homemaking are better, and healthier, ways to approach domestic duties. For example, Tiffany D. says that one of her main objectives on *Imperfectly Happy* is to reclaim “treasured knowledge that is slipping away from us in our fast-paced consumer world.” She fears that “vintage skills [are] taking a backseat to technology,” but happiness is found in homesteading practices and the mastery of “skills for a more self-sufficient life.” Still, even the green domestic pioneer Shannon Hayes (2010) says that it is unrealistic to expect total household self-reliance; most families will still need the industrial commodity-production system to meet some of their needs.

The basic concept of domesticity is not monolithic and is therefore open to some latitude in definition. As a set of behavioral expectations, domesticit(ies) “are the processes and sites through which people create sense of belonging, safety, security, and comfort” (Dowling & Power, 2013, p. 290). In an unpredictable society, the reviving dormant domestic skills may cultivate such feelings of belonging and security and give practitioners a strengthened sense of independence (Hayes, 2010). But since domesticity as a social construct “revolves around imaginaries of family and gender and, in particular, the nuclear family and the housewife,” some
suggest that the role of women in domestic lifestyle politics would seem to be necessarily constrained (Dowling & Power, 2013, p. 295). On the other hand, the home space “could operate as a site for the ‘the nurturance of a female counter-culture’…where domestic skills and crafts might be revalued as a challenge to a male dominated system” (Hollows, 2005, 102).

“Recovering” from university & work

Multiple degrees and previous success in an array of careers were a common feature of many bloggers’ personal stories, but they were overwhelmingly characterized as having been unfulfilling or spoken of using a sarcastic or self-deprecating tone. Aronica implies that the psychology degree she earned at Spelman College is only useful for manipulating her children.11 Simplify, Live, Love author and “semi-crunchy mom of four” Michelle Marine is “snarky” and dismissive about her two degrees; she dryly describes her M.A. in English Linguistics – she “studied the power of sexist language and its effects on English as Second Language learners” – as “super interesting stuff” and her B.A. in German Literature as “highly practical and useful.” Lori Popkewitz Alper (Groovy Green Living) says that she is a “recovering attorney” and Lisa Bryan (Downshiftology) was a “quintessential, “type A” corporate workaholic” before she restarted life as a certified health coach. At Gurl Gone Green, Suzi Swope confesses that while working in public relations, she “realized [that her] love for people and crating was not being satisfied as [she] sat behind a desk.”

On the other hand, training in holistic wellness practices tends to be a valorized achievement. Natureal Mom’s Lacey Mackey is a certified birth doula and lactation educator

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11 Notably, she ascribes more value to her MBA in Marketing; this achievement is part of her narrative about “momtrepreneurialism” and identity as a “WAHM” (Work at Home Mom, as opposed to the designation SAHM, or Stay at Home Mom).
who expresses a belief in “trusting [the] innate wisdom and instincts” of mothers. Katie W. is also a doula; Nadia N. is a nutritional therapy practitioner; Lisa B. was an organic hairstylist and esthetician, “obsessed” with making sure she only used natural personal care products; and Christina A. is an herbalist and certified aromatherapist (ditto Tiffany Davis of *Imperfectly Happy* and Rebecca of *The Sparkle Nest*). And as discussed above, taking on work that is flexible is also common, and rhetorically valorized. “Appropriate” flexible jobs include creative or knowledge-based labor (freelance writing, copyediting), “gig labor” (Scarlet P. suggests earning extra cash by dog-sitting with the app Rover), and micro-commerce (selling eggs, maintaining an Etsy store). Even though they are encouraged as plucky entrepreneurialism, such jobs are precarious, benefits-stripped, and offer no reliable long-term income (Duffy, 2017; Swarns, 2014).

In 2015, the Pew Research Center reported that most Americans – around 45% – believe that the ideal situation for mothers and young children was to have the mother work part-time (compared to 70% who said men should work full-time outside the home). Yet nearly 80% of all who were surveyed did not agree that “women should return to their traditional role in society” (Pew, 2015). In reality, 64% of mothers with children under six are “in the labor force,” with 72% of that population working full-time (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017); clearly my sample of women inhabiting the green domestic private sphere is not quite representative of those numbers but rather skewed in favor of mothers who are not steadily employed outside the home. The bloggers who rely on freelance work or the “gig economy” enforce a common discourse that celebrates “momtrepreneurialism” (the expectation that women are natural self-starters) and downplays the precarity of flexible labor.
“The More I Blogged, the More I Loved it”: Discourses about Digital Labor

*This Organic Girl*, one of the newest blogs in my study, is engaging, well-written, and aesthetically tidy. Blog author Lisa F. is funny and open; in one post she shares frank advice with aspiring green lifestyle influencers and discloses her initial skepticism with the profession, saying: “I honestly thought people blogged for a hobby – and to be even more honest I thought it was a complete waste of time” (Fennessy, 2017). She jokes about early mistakes (“I legit sent an email to Vitamix – haha!”) while still offering valuable practical tips about securing sponsorship, interacting with viewers, and building relationships with other bloggers. This is a transparent discussion of her experience in the business of blogging, but the post gives no indication that blogging for a living is a risky endeavor. In fact, Lisa starts by saying that she has been so successful that her husband was able to quit his job and her blog revenue supports their family. She breezily sums up her short history as a green lifestyle exert, rhetorically minimizing the labor that building and maintaining a site and several associated social media profiles requires: “I found my niche and got into a groove and things took off from there.”

Once again, Lisa’s advice presupposes that the option of dedicating oneself to the immaterial affective labor required to pursue green domesticity and blog about it is available to anyone, and denies the economic realities that prevent many women from pursuing a work-life balance that includes fewer hours spent at work. Not all families can function on a single income stream, so forgoing the regular wages that a mother would earn outside the home is impossible. Since the financial success of blogs is not assured, taking the risk of leaving a job – especially after the birth of a child, when family expenses are presumably rising – is not a luxury that many women would be able to afford.
Occasionally, though, an author will address this insecurity directly. For example, writing about the decision to leave her job while facing pregnancy and a kidney disease, Madeline S. recounts a conversation with her husband which resulted in her deciding to “let him worry about the business stuff, confident that he is fully capable of making decisions in the best interests of our little family, and I will worry about the baby stuff.” She concludes the post by saying “[e]verything is going to be fine. (It has to be)” (Somerville, 2012). Although Madeline’s marriage has since ended, she has been able to continue supporting herself with flexible work like writing for well-known publications like *The Guardian* and publishing a book (*All You Need is Less*, 2014). This sort of cultural knowledge labor is often framed as being “passionate work” that rewards entrepreneurial women with “a creative outlet” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 4). She acknowledges the effort required to make this a reality (“I have been working my ass off”) but attributes her success to personal ambition: “All I could think from that new, cold, steely place of resolve was “Fucking watch me’”” (Somerville, 2015). Her success is laudable but the narrative of individual triumph through perseverance in what is assumed to be a meritocratic sphere hides the things that have helped her achieve it: the initial support of her partner that afforded time to write a book; the sustained material support of her family; and her education.

Although these examples frame making money as a natural and inevitable consequence of hard work, Jarrett (2014) points out that there is a noneconomic significance to this type of activity. She describes this significance as playing out two ways: first, social reproduction “generate[s] other regimes of value that support and sustain the [external, neoliberal] capitalist system” (Jarrett, 2014, p. 16); and second, the authors point to a personal (or even political) satisfaction that comes with performing both green domestic and digital labor. In other words,
even while these women are generating value for others (outside the green domestic networked public) through their actions they are experiencing the use-value of these activities.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the discourses of the bloggers as agentic travelers on a path to wellness. The discourse often mirrored those of self-help, and postfeminist discourses, and, although these bloggers are solidly embedded in the realities of the digital economy, they embrace this embeddedness as a key part of their journey. The final chapter reflects on the analyses of this chapter and the previous one. I brief discuss two prevalent frames in the green domestic networked public, and then talk about systemic patterns of consumption. Finally, I reflect on future research focusing on green domestic blogging and other related discursive turns.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In *Radical Homemakers*, Shannon Hayes (2010) asserts that “developing domestic skills gives you all the power” (p. 185). The nature of this power, however, is unclear. Certainly, domestic skills cannot be equated with structural power, and those who practice green domesticity have limited ability to effect change on a society-wide scale or to make life better for others. Using language that invokes the neoliberal ideals of individualism and responsibilization, Hayes (2014) later goes on to suggest that “it is up to each and every one of us to strive to live a life of personal accountability that will enable this earth to heal,” and encourage others to care for themselves (p.140). In this final chapter, I will discuss the ways that Hayes’s rhetoric is woven throughout the green domesticity networked public in the form of communicative frames, along with the manner in which this discourse facilitates the development of patterns of commodification. Finally, I end with some final thoughts about the research as a whole including possible limitations and potential avenues of future research.

**Combining Analysis: Communicative Frames**

Based on Entman’s (1993) explanation of the function of communicative frames as devices that diagnose, judge, and suggest remedies for addressing problems, I have identified two prominent frames in the green domestic networked public: the *wellness as a journey* frame and the *obligatory empowerment* frame. Both of these were derived from political economic and feminist theory. Each one contributes in different ways to the discursive construction of a relatively specific lifestyle-associated identity: the eco-conscious, feminine neoliberal subject,
whose agency is primarily exercised through consumption and situated within the domestic sphere.

**The wellness as a journey frame**

Self-maintained mental health, naturally achieved bodily perfection, and a pristine, non-toxic home are all basic components of the aspirational state of “wellness.” Green domesticity blogs use language and imagery that makes these expectations clear. Furthermore, the responsibility of pursing wellness through specified lifestyle behaviors is placed squarely on individual women, who must act out this disciplinary behavior continuously on themselves but also on behalf of their families. The distinctly neoliberal commitment to responsibilization is discursively reinforced in posts on a wide range of subjects: dietary restriction to heal various illnesses, clean beauty and self-care, “enlightened” holistic approaches to motherhood, and carefully concocted DIY household products, among others. As caretakers, wives and mothers are made accountable, not only for their own physical and psychological wellbeing but also for the health of the environment and economic stability. Succeeding at wellness is framed in green domesticity blogs as being a matter of either willpower and personal fortitude or, should that not be sufficient, targeted consumption (or conspicuous non-consumption) of specific commodities.

**The obligatory empowerment frame**

Positioning the adoption of postfeminist domesticity – and oftentimes, the material reality of flexible employment – as unequivocally empowering while obscuring the structural and ideological forces that exclude many women from this lifestyle is a forcefully effective way to legitimize the individualist discourse that underpins neoliberalism. Regardless of potential social
constraints, such as economic precarity and masculinist devaluation of femininity and domestic labor, the lifestyle practices that are encouraged in the blogs I have looked at are always presented as being freely chosen and, even more importantly, liberating. Green domestic behavior is proffered as an escape from out-of-control consumerism, corporate culture, and even (through personal education and, somewhat paradoxically, targeted consumerism) the dangers caused by unregulated markets.

Looking at the blogs through these two frames helps make sense of hegemonic ideology and how discourse operates in a system of governmentality, where power is negotiated but control over the production of knowledge (which, in the context of my study, is performed by individuals doing immaterial digital labor, but then appropriated by capital) ultimately reinforces the neoliberal capitalist ethos (Fuchs, 2010). The affective and immaterial labor performed by the women in my study, in their domestic roles as well as their blogger roles, is “a necessary input to capitalist circuits of exchange, producing healthy, socially adept, [and] well-nourished” subjects (Jarrett, 2014, p. 14). It is the work of social reproduction, normalizing the current systems of politics and economics and reinforcing certain lifestyle behaviors, desires, and appearances. As such, the green domesticity blogosphere is always shaped by market logic and motivated by commodification.

**Patterns of Commodification in the Green Domesticity Networked Public**

For purposes of analysis, content was roughly divided into two categories. The first, common features of digital structure, included code-based devices such as squeeze pages, giveaway widgets and email app portals, and platform hosting services. The second, recurring discourses, were located through linguistic and visual repetition across blogs. Occasionally, an
object was representative of both categories. For example, tags or categories that directed the reader to a list of blogger-approved products, as well as FTC-required disclaimers or disclosure statements (which were significant when present and when absent), are both structural features that convey ideological messages. The flexibility and reflexive nature of critical qualitative analysis allowed me to consider these objects in different ways based on context and analytic objective. By sorting through various types of blog content, I was able to identify three patterns of commodification: products as solutions, bloggers and their labor, and audience data.

The basic process of commodification is familiar to any citizen in a post-Fordist society: goods or services are assigned economic value and become exchangeable. Consumer goods automatically appear to us as commodities, so the first pattern of commodification is relatively easy to identify, but pinpointing the mechanisms and tactics that make products into solutions requires looking past financial value (Smith, 2015). In my research, I found that products – from small personal items like toothpaste and moisturizer to appliances like the InstaPot to experiences like the W.E.L.L. Summit – were consistently praised not simply for what they do, but more importantly for what they do for you. Selling items based on function or helpful features is common practice but in these green domesticity blogs the commodities took on the aura of being green and/or associated with wellness (physical, mental, or even environmental). The desirability of especially highly regarded (or profitably sponsored) products was reinforced by product giveaways, which were consistently associated with positive emotional experiences like caring, convenience, and excitement.

A post which illustrates this process of transformation comes from Christina A., who writes about the stress that came from her divorce in early 2018. Her words are touchingly

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12 Lessig (2006, 2012) and boyd (2011) would want me to point out that structures in digital space always have ideological implications which are tied to who coded them, who can alter them, where they direct traffic, and so on. However, in this context I’m referring more to ideological messages read through semiotic analysis.
honest and convey the feels that many women experience during a marital split. She says: “Last year was a tough year for me and my being human and all, I found myself going through a period of time where I let a lot of things in my life go, including my nutritional care for myself. We've all been there, where we let things in our lives slide because we just don't want to deal anymore.” Christina found herself feeling lethargic, tired, and dizzy. A physician diagnosed her with iron deficiency and while she tried to address the problem through dietary adjustments, she found that her plant-based (i.e., vegan) lifestyle made it difficult. A solution came in the form of Blood Builder, a product from the whole-food supplement producer MegaFood. Christina expounds on the nutritional utility of these vitamins (citing an as-of-yet unpublished clinical study), but the message is more complicated than nutrition alone. The very openness and confessional tone she uses at the start of the post solidify the “transformative” nature of this commodity, which takes on the promise of helping one navigate the very difficult and often painful experience of divorce. The concluding paragraph is much more upbeat: “The sun is shining and I am ready to go outside! Now that I have willed myself back to my healthy lifestyle and started taking proper care of myself, I am feeling a million times better” (so much so, in fact, that she had enough “energy and drive” to complete a top-to-bottom home spring cleaning). The story Christina tells not only invokes the individualist wellness discourse – “willing” oneself back to a healthy lifestyle – but also suggests that MegaFood’s Blood Builder was an instrumental part of her journey from an unwell emotional state back into an energetic, self-sufficient, and domestically-motivated subject.

Associating a commodity with qualities or abilities that transcend its utilitarian purpose (i.e., its use value) is part of a consumer system that Raymond Williams (1999) described as magic: an organized system of inducements which is “functionally very similar to magical
systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology” (p. 422). Although he was speaking of the professionalized advertising industry, the process is clearly present in the green domesticity blogs. According to Williams (1999), for modern consumers the mere use value or material capability of a commodity is not sufficiently convincing to motivate purchases, so consumerism becomes “a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings which in a different cultural pattern might be more directly available” (p. 422). In Christina’s Blood Builder post, happiness and energy are presented as a “different cultural pattern” from the depression that she experienced in a difficult emotional time, a pattern that can be accessed through MegaFood’s miracle vitamin.

The commodification of bloggers and their labor most obviously occurs when they receive money for brand ambassadorships or sponsored posts. Additionally, nearly every site contained external product links to facilitate quick online purchases of the products they endorsed, either explicitly through reviews or implicitly through inclusion (for example, in posts that featured recipes for food or DIY cleaners or body-care products it was common to see Amazon links for seemingly-random ingredients like isopropyl alcohol or oatmeal or baking soda). Around half of the blogs took this affiliate links technique one step further by offering to send readers to the author’s carefully curated Amazon store.

In a post from March of 2018, Lisa F. linked to This Organic Girl’s Amazon Shop digital storefront four times and went on to offer images and links of eight different “everyday staples” like a food dehydrator ($249.99, but eligible for Amazon Prime) or coconut-based tooth whitening strips ($28.99). Of course these links generate revenue for Lisa if readers click then buy, but collectively they also weave together a narrative about the author’s identity. The
recommended products become a collage of things that each woman has deemed valuable, each with its own branded significance; a jar of Uncle Harry’s Fluoride-Free Natural Toothpaste is in, while a mainstream toothpaste brand like Crest is out. The authors are not only creating their identity out of brands, but are simultaneously leveraging the trust of readers who feel connected to the authors and would like to emulate their lifestyle. This commodification of self is a strategy adopted by lifestyle bloggers of all sorts, pointing to the precarity of digital immaterial labor (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Slightly less obvious methods of blogger commodification are the “publisher networks” that many blogs utilize; to a site visitor, the small logo at the very bottom of the page or the easy-to-miss text around ads might not seem significant (see Figure 6.1). But the purpose of these services is to monetize blogs by connecting authors to advertisers that align with their message or the focus on their content. Finally, icons that send readers directly to a social media profile generate more traffic across networks and make sharing posts on Twitter or Facebook very easy. A shared post is likely to bring readers back to the blog; it also generates revenue for the blog service platform and the social media platform by harvesting data, which is part of the third pattern of commodification: audiences.
The final recurring pattern, commodification of audiences, is perhaps the least obvious of the three. The mechanisms of this process are often deliberately hidden behind hyperlinks, within terms of service agreements or privacy policies, or in sponsorship disclosures. Without active searching, average readers are unlikely to come into contact with such documents, which is why the FTC recently set forth guidelines that specify unambiguous, “clear and prominent” display of disclaimers that are of relevance to audience members (for example: paid product reviews, medical liability statements, and third-party transfer of identifiable data). Some bloggers adhered to the FTC’s suggested practices but others did not; in one case (on *The Soft Landing*) the terms of use statement began by saying: “It kills us to have to take up a whole page with this lengthy
Audiences are commodified when widgets, such as those that host giveaways or permit commenting and pop-up squeeze pages that ask for email addresses, pressure or require them to surrender personal information. The information may include an email address or access to a social network profile, both of which permit by default ("passive consent") the harvesting of data from contacts and connections.

The reward for providing these details is often a subscription to an email newsletter (in which the email marketing company also gets user data) or the ability to comment (which encourages social media linking, also a valuable source of personal information). In the case of sponsored reviews or paid content, the it is the blogger who receives financial compensation; for readers, this might seem like a perfectly fair trade because it supports production of the media they are enjoying. Data harvesting is much more opaque operation. Entering your email address or sharing your username could generate data points that are collected, aggregated, and potentially sold by several different companies at the same time. The recent controversy over political firm Cambridge Analytica gaining access to data from over 85 million Facebook profiles indicates that most users are both unaware of the volume of data harvesting and firmly opposed to the practice (Rosenberg, 2018).

**Limitations and Future Research**

Recognition of complex structural issues like economic instability, environmental degradation, and ever-evolving threats human health is common among young Americans. As neoliberal citizens (or citizen-consumers), many pursue change that is based on market rationality (consumerism) and enacted individually. Although they are aware of negative results of unchecked industrialism, consumerism, and political partisanship, many millennials forgo
traditional forms of activism and instead choose to seek out domestic-sphere solutions that protect themselves and their own families but leave more vulnerable populations to fend for themselves (Szasz, 2007). Thus, the small behavioral changes that are a central feature of lifestyle politics are emphasized over institutional reform. Using the green domestic networked public as a research site, this dissertation has examined the ways that the neoliberal commitment to individualism and responsibilization plays out in a discursive space that is heavily gendered and classed.

While a sample of 25 blogs is larger than some similarly structured qualitative studies, it does not provide enough data to extrapolate trends from other digital publics, nor does it generate enough data to reliably generalize conclusions that are relevant outside the green domestic networked public. I believe that I have identified some interesting and significant discourses and patterns, but they are certainly structured by my own subjectivity (for instance, I am not a mother so my interpretation of that experience is clearly limited); I think that speaking to the bloggers I studied would be a way to overcome that limitation. Specific questions about blogger motivation – perhaps designed to reach beyond the most commonly-offered explanations about motherhood and healthy lifestyle, or to focus on their desire to affect their readers – could reveal how authors view and relate to their audience. I see that as a particularly important angle if we are interested in exploring their intentions with regard to political speech and political identity.

There are several elements of this project that would serve as productive starting points for future research. Most significantly, I think that additional consideration of green domestic blogs as political communication (as I just mentioned) would help contextualize this research between critical political science and critical feminist media studies; this is an area of scholarship I would like to expand in the future. Again, interviews and engagements with users of these
blogs could be a fruitful research avenue. To what extent, for example, do readers of the blogs consider themselves to be political, or believe that reading the blogs encourages them to be political? If consumption is a part of the green domestic blogs, at what point may this lead to more explicit commodity activism (boycotts, explicit rejection of the idea of branding, forms of culture jamming, organizing around consumption)? And do users of these blogs combine them with other discourses that may create meanings and interpretations beyond those of these blogs? These questions might best be approached through analysis of user comments, likes, reposts, retweets, and so on. These differ from platform to platform, as different social media spaces encourage different types of interaction, but a comprehensive examination may yield insight into the identities, beliefs, and motivations of readers as well as the relationship between readers and authors.

In what other ways might we envision the mix of environmentalism, feminism, and consumption? Surely the mix presented in these blogs is not the only one. As new media forms are created that highlight gender and environmentalism, what are the differences in these forms? This dissertation focused much on the commonalities of the blogs, but we may also ask about their distinctiveness.

In this era of mounting environmental crises, faced with the policies of a president who seems to deny their existence, and confronted with the power of a commercial culture that helped (through digital audience targeting and data-mining online) to elect him, people of all genders seem to be grasping the reality that change needs to be pursued more actively. The promise of influential gendered movements like #MeToo at least offer some evidence that the lifestyle and consumer politics presented within these blogs are not the final word in green feminism; women are finding a voice and will hopefully continue to use it in conversation about political
challenges – like the environment – that matter, and urgently so. Charting this future, and finding these conversations in the various spheres that contain, facilitate, and often constrain them will lead to an increasing understanding of the complex linkages between gender, feminine identity, and the environment. Further, considering the masculinized and commercialized constraints that encompass (and therefore restrict) potentially liberatory conversations in digital spaces through networked publics can help us see how old hierarchies of power continue to exist and limit voices in the new digital mediascape.
### APPENDIX: COMPLETE LIST OF BLOGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog Title</th>
<th>Author Name</th>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body Unburden</td>
<td>Nadia Neumann</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confessions of a Stay-at-Home Mom</td>
<td>Stephanie Anderson</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Green Living</td>
<td>Carissa Bonham</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crunchy Mommy, The</td>
<td>Aronica Bell Cole</td>
<td>Black, married, WAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downshiftology</td>
<td>Lisa Bryan</td>
<td>White, unmarried, no kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Focus Blog</td>
<td>Scarlet Paolicchi</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gurl Gone Green</td>
<td>Suzi Swope</td>
<td>White, married, no kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groovy Green Living</td>
<td>Lori Popkewitz Alper</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hippy Homemaker, The</td>
<td>Christina Anthis</td>
<td>White, divorced, SAHM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imperfectly Happy Homemaker</td>
<td>Tiffany Davis</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lindsay Dahl</td>
<td>Lindsay Dahl</td>
<td>White, married, full-time work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature Moms Blog</td>
<td>Tiffany Washko</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature’s Nurture</td>
<td>Sarah UmmYousef</td>
<td>WOC, married, SAHM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natureal Mom</td>
<td>Lacey Mackey</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
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<td>Organic Parenthood</td>
<td>Tiffany Ray</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
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<td>Pistachio Project, The</td>
<td>Brittany Thomas</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
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<td>Radical Homemaker, The</td>
<td>Shannon Hayes</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
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<td>Simple Green Moms</td>
<td>Meghann</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM(?)</td>
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<td>Simplify, Live, Love</td>
<td>Michelle Marine</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Easy Being Green</td>
<td>Lindsey G.</td>
<td>White, married, WAHM</td>
</tr>
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<td>Blog Name</td>
<td>Blogger Name</td>
<td>Race/Relocation Status</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>Soft Landing, The</td>
<td>Alicia Voorhies, Laura Saville, Joanne Whitman, Pat Land</td>
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<td>Soule Mama</td>
<td>Amanda Blake Soule</td>
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<td>Rebecca</td>
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<td>Sweet Madeline</td>
<td>Madeline Somerville</td>
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<td>This Organic Girl</td>
<td>Lisa Fennessy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellness Mama</td>
<td>Katie Wells</td>
<td>White, married, SAHM</td>
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