

Brands vs. babies: Paid content and authenticity in Canadian mommy blogs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influencers with the specific interest of parenting during a specific period in early 2017 when what were then called 'Mommy Bloggers' were charging public relations firms and the brands they represent upwards of \$2,000 per blog post to write favourable product reviews. Findings revealed their business model and ability to continue selling their audience as a commodity was in jeopardy as audience trust in bloggers was on the decline compared to any other information source about brands; new, albeit vague, regulations (not laws) required the blogger to disclose any commercial relationship; and qualitative studies revealed audience negative opinion of the takeover of commercial content and resulting lost sense of community. Using determinants of authenticity as a measure of a blogger's ability to maintain her audience with a personal narrative, a quantitative content analysis of 290 blog posts published by 30 of the top parenting bloggers in Canada was used to demonstrate with correlations that paid content was threatening authenticity and that a blogger's legitimacy as an influencer was being weakened by commercial content.

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Over the past decade, and mostly in the last five years, public relations agencies and brands have shifted their practices to include paid media, generating exposure for clients by paying bloggers, or influencers, to write positive content on their social media channels. Social media influencer marketing, as it is now commonly known, is now part of the integrated public relations package used primarily by lifestyle, fashion and beauty brands. Prior to paid influencer marketing, public relations agencies relied largely on earned, unpaid media relations to promote their client to target audiences via relationships with journalists in traditional media. This sea change in the industry did not happen overnight and has not been without its challenges:

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ethical, legal and financial.

Mommy bloggers, the focus of this research, initially started writing on-line journals as a way to belong and contribute to a community with a shared interest, parenthood; to share, commiserate and learn from each other. Today, they are businesses with legions of followers. As such, they demand thousands of dollars per post to write positive brand reviews; payment in exchange for their ability to reach the mom-market and influence sales on products they or their family use. They have become businesses in their own right: offering brands a menu of services from writing original promotional content on social media channels, event attendance, ambassador and spokesperson opportunities to collaboration in product development.

At the time this quantitative research was conducted in 2017, the influencer market was heating up and rates for services were escalating exponentially not annually, but monthly. Public relations firms were at the behest of the influencer who demanded higher and higher rates in exchange for access to their growing follower base who were the client's target demographic. It was a pivotal time to ask: Is this business model sustainable? Will the audience that was attracted to influencer content because of its authentic and relatable content still be loyal when that content is branded?

What this study found was that their business model was in jeopardy: audience trust in bloggers was on the decline compared to any other information source about brands (Envionics Communications, 2017); new, vague regulations (not laws) by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission and Advertising Standards Canada required the blogger to disclose any commercial relationship (Federal Trade Commission, 2019; Ad Standards Canada, 2019) and many were not doing so. Qualitative studies revealed their audience did not like how the takeover of commercial content threatened the blog's sense of community (Hunter, 2016). These realities created an opportunity to empirically answer: What happens to a blogger's narrative when a commercial relationship is present? Can the promotion of brands and the stories of babies coexist?

To answer, Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) cultural intermediary qualifications were used as the framework of an exploratory quantitative content analysis of the top 30 parenting blogs in Canada to determine the linear association between disclosure and brand mentions to authenticity. Authenticity is why audiences were presumably first attracted to the blog as they looked for a community of shared experiences. My ontological assumption is pragmatic: without authenticity, the blogger loses credibility, and without that, her business model crumbles since the model is based on selling the audience-as-commodity, as theorized by Dallas Smythe (2001).

This study offers insight into one segment of the social media influencer market, which at the time in 2017, was largely referred to by industry, databases and in existing research as 'mommy bloggers' because women were the by far the primary authors on this medium. However, in this study, this term is used inclusive of all genders involved in parenting. Indeed, of the 290 public blogs analyzed, three were written by men.

At the time, blogs – a long form of social media content self-published on websites, usually about 500-750 words in length with accompanying photos – were heavily used for personal storytelling and then, brand promotion. To use a familiar parenting reference, these bloggers were going through an awkward phase as they tried to balance their desire to make money with their ability to connect to other parents. Blogs are still used in 2020 but have largely been replaced by shorter, more visual social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

In the context of the evolving public relations practice that now includes paid as well as earned media strategies, my research provides Canadian empirical data intended for public relations practitioners, policymakers, influencers, public relations professors and social media followers, offering exploratory insights for all into the paid influencer market and the consequences on the industry, the audience and the consumer.

Disclosure statement

In keeping with the subject matter of this article, the researcher would like to disclose her own biases and connections to the subject matter. The researcher is a mother, one who had her own blog from 2005 to 2010 that did not accept any ads or include any product promotion or payment. The researcher had a successful 25 year career as a public relations practitioner in the days before influencers and social media. Those experiences informed both her choice of this subject matter and her coding of the sample population of blog entries analyzes. This may have introduced some bias, but the research was mindful of that fact. Indeed, the researcher is confident that this personal experience and history with the subject matter has given her a unique ability to serve as a subject matter expert in coding the data. The researcher's background informed her training of the paid second coder, who was a recent public relations undergraduate alum.

Review of literature

Blogs are online journals with “a strong sense of the author’s personality, passions and points of view” (Lopez, 2009, p. 734; see also Xifra & Huer-tas, 2008). The act of blogging was made possible with free self-publishing tools such as Blogger and WordPress that emerged out of Web 2.0, coming of age between 2003 and 2013, coincidentally around the same period many career-women were choosing to ‘opt-out’ of the workplace (Kupenberg & Stone, 2008; Warner, 2015) to stay home and raise their children. The technology gave women a vehicle to have a published voice. Women initially used blog technology to share stories about motherhood over the internet, resulting in virtual communities of like-minded followers with emotional connections and bonds of trust and support (Blanchard, 2006; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2011; Wu, 2016). By connecting through shared experiences, frustrations and interests – by being relatable – the audience develops a sense of trust that bloggers are being authentic (Grose, 2012; Hunter, 2016; Mendelsohn, 2010; Morton, 2018).

Through blogging, women found not only a like-minded community, they also discovered that a financial gain could be made. Every Cheetos-smearred little finger, every visit to Disneyland, every successful dinner served gave them the power and ability to become influential cultural intermediaries, a term coined by Bourdieu (1984) well before the digital age, and defined as those who “sell themselves as models or guarantors of the value of their products” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 365). This framework has been used to analyze the advertising industry, journalism, public relations practitioners and celebrity chefs (Smith Maguire, 2014) but not specifically social media influencers. A recommendation for a diaper cream or a new snack not only translated into what is considered on-trend, but into real sales for the brand. By blogging, women were creating “mommies as consumers” (Lopez, 2009, p. 739), who through their blogs, initially attracted advertisers (Mendelsohn, 2010; Rubin, 2012) wanting access to the world’s largest target market: moms (Foshee, 2010). With tremendous spending power as the chief financial officer of nearly every household, moms control upwards of 80 per cent of household spending (Female Factor, 2016).

Cultural intermediaries have several defining attributes, one of which is they are part of a new economy that depends on the production of needs of consumers, telling people they need something they didn’t know they needed. Social media has offered an ideal vehicle to showcase products within

a lifestyle designed to create want. Brands know “women dominate social media, influencing the purchasing, voting, health care and lifestyle choices of North American women” (Rubin, 2012, n.p.) and were quick turn to their own consumers to help market their products, satisfying another attribute of the cultural intermediaries: they are also ‘tastemakers’ (Bourdieu, 1984). Carefully curated promotional content creates envy and want with products most likely to be used by the consumer, tapping into the ‘I want what she’s got’ motivator. Parents with a social media platform were ideally suited to embrace tastemaker status. As consumers of products required or desired for their new family, blogging gave them them vehicle to also be participants in the marketing of a brand (Lefebvre, 2007) by endorsing products relevant to their lives.

Bourdieu (1984) also identified cultural intermediaries as those with expertise and legitimacy (Smith Maguire, 2014) based on the social standing or professionalization of their occupation (Bourdieu, 1984). Arguably, there is no such thing a professional mom but bloggers have acquired legitimacy as social media influencers based on the size of their following. The most successful mommy bloggers attracted a large following of audience/consumers with the quality of their narrative (Van Dijck, 2013), capitalizing on their private life by turning images of their children and witty stories of their shenanigans into a reliable income. Based on the size of their audience (followers), influencers range in category from micro (consumers with thousands of followers) to macro (professional bloggers with hundreds of thousands of followers) to mega (celebrities with more than 500,000 followers such as *Cravings By Chrissy*, Chrissy Teigen’s highly popular blog (Teigen, 2020)). The bloggers analyzed in this research would be considered micro.

Legitimacy also comes with having an expertise in a particular field (Bourdieu, 1984). The field for the mommy blogger is parenting, and by nature of having kids and being able to write about it, mommy bloggers were afforded expertise. Indeed, today’s parenting experts are not those found on a book shelf with a doctor title, but the moms and dads “who have built a massive collection of knowledge on raising children and made it available in a virtual space” (Stansberry, 2011, p. 11). “Mothers often prefer the wart-and-all experiences of other mothers online – and the ability to discuss them interactively – to the dry, inflexible pronouncements spouted by experts in books and parenting magazines” (Mendelsohn, 2010, n.p.). Bourdieu asserts that the cultural intermediaries “are tastemakers and legitimation authorities because of their personal investment in the work” (Smith Maguire, 2014, p. 22), which gives them cultural capital. If you’re a parent, nothing personally invests you more than taking care of a little human that you created. The balance between

the personal (the parent) and the professional (the content generator and audience-attractor) “generates a sincere disposition, which is fundamental to the effectiveness of the new occupations’ symbolic and ethical implications ... In short, they sell well because they believe in what they sell” (Smith Maguire, p. 22-23; Bourdieu, 365). It is this sincerity that makes them authentic.

The unique combination of authenticity, influence and access attracts brands and is the reason bloggers deserve to be paid to promote (Ehm, 2015; Morton, 2018; Wu, 2016). Herein is the basis of their business model: a blogger’s audience of followers is sold to brands as a commodity, a phenomenon explored by Sanoval and Fuchs (2010) and Fisher (2015) who applied this social media practice to the audience labour theory of Dallas Smythe (2001). “Because the audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price, and is a commodity” (Smythe, 2001, p. 256). The role of the audience is the cornerstone of digital word-of-mouth (Lefebvre, 2007), especially when 90 per cent of Canadian moms rely on referrals from family and friends they trust when making purchasing decisions (Lytle, 2013). As their influence and ability to sell product grows with their followers, these women were no longer satisfied with the payback of free goods or Google ad revenue; they wanted to be paid for their influence and social capital. Their business model continues to demand brands pay them commensurate with their influence, measured by the size of their audience (number of followers) and their ability to engage with sharable, likable content for, and beyond, those followers.

Economically, it is not known how large the social media influencer market is in Canada, but in 2017, it was estimated at up to \$1 billion per year with as many as 100,000 social media influencers in Canada and growing faster than it could be tracked (Roumeliotis, 2017). Though not all bloggers post rate cards and many use different methods to determine rates, anecdotally, in May 2017, mommy bloggers specifically charged between \$20 to \$2,000 for one blog post, with an average of \$500 per post. In January 2018, some influencers were starting at \$2,500 per social media or blog post, and one blogger from British Columbia, Canada was earning between \$15,000 to \$20,000 per post (Morton, 2018). It’s not hard to assume that this upward trajectory of rate increases has continued into 2020, all commensurate with the number of followers, volume of posts and number of platforms. Solo blog post deals are tapering off, as influencers offer brands comprehensive social media partnership packages that include additional platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. These packages justify increased compensation: more time is invested in promotion with more audience impressions accessed. Public relations agency leaders

predicted in 2016 that their industry would grow 33 per cent by 2021, in part because “the emphasis on earned media is shifting to owned, shared and paid. PR needs to learn to leverage paid media because that’s where the business is headed and the competition is already there” (USC Centre for Public Relations and The Holmes Report, 2016, p. 5). In addition to fees to the influencers, agencies generate revenue with billable hours required for researching, negotiating contracts and influencer management. The public relations industry is willing to pay because it wants access to this prime audience of mothers but it also wants the increased revenue stream.

Regulators acknowledge “authentic consumer reviews on digital platforms benefit both consumers and business, providing a wealth of unbiased product information to help consumers make informed decisions, and rewarding businesses that provide a superior product or service” (Competition Bureau, 2015, p. 10). Astroturfing, the act of presenting paid and deceptive reviews and endorsements as unsolicited, is prohibited by regulations. However, it is unclear if astroturfing applies to paying influencers: Are brands paying for a positive and potentially ‘fake’ review, or are they paying for access to audience as they would an advertisement? Astroturfing is aimed to protect consumers from glowing reviews by people who have never used the product, or who were paid to write the reviews without disclosing such payment to the audience. “Unchecked, it will seriously erode consumer confidence in the authenticity of online reviews, at a cost to both consumers and business” (Competition Bureau, 2015, p. 10). At the heart of these regulations is the preservation of unbiased product information and authenticity.

To address the growing influencer business, guidelines by Advertising Standards Canada (ASC) came into effect in 2017 and were updated in 2019 requiring influencers to fully disclose any commercial partnership or material connection, which covers any kind of monetary compensation, free products and discounts (Ad Standards Canada, 2019). But, the ASC is an industry-operated self-regulating body with no legal authority to enforce the regulations. Right now, if the ASC receives a complaint from a consumer about non-disclosure, the influencer is asked to update their post or take it down. If they don’t, it is considered fraud and the complaint goes to the Competition Bureau. There is very little academic research with respect to the legal requirements around disclosure in Canada.

The ethical exploration of disclosure of commercial interests presents in research in other jurisdictions, but not in Canada. In the U.S., Jensen’s (2011) research titled “Blogola, sponsored posts and the ethics of blogging” describes the new (at the time) practice of taking money for content with the advice

to follow the Federal Trade Commission rules for disclosure or face a U.S. \$16,000 fine per blog post (in 2011, that fee was \$11,000). In Australia, Archer, Pettigrew and Harrigan (2014) conducted an online survey of Australian mum bloggers, analyzing responses of 238 bloggers; 68 per cent reported they believed there were no ethical issues to blogging, but of those who said there were, sponsored posts and disclosure was listed as the primary concern. In Canada, there is no such research.

During the relatively short time since mommy bloggers began cashing in, as of 2017 very little research had been conducted on the impact of audience. The most relevant qualitative Canadian study to explore the audience commodity in this context is "Monetizing the mommy: Mommy blogs and the audience commodity" (Hunter, 2016). Findings revealed:

bloggers are increasingly creating content aimed at selling products, rather than telling authentic stories. Participants are particularly disturbed by sponsored posts, accusing bloggers of crafting their stories to fit the product for sale, or the wishes of the sponsor, rather than simply telling stories for the sake of sharing. (Hunter, 2016, p. 1312)

These findings are consistent with concerns expressed by Lopez (2009), Mendelsohn (2010), Smith (2010), and contemporary media articles (e.g.: Ronan, 2015; Wu, 2016). Participants in Hunter's (2016) study regarded blogs with commercial content as "morphing into performances... disingenuous and exploitive" (p. 1318). In exchange for money and the audience commodification, the sense of community is lost, Hunter (2016) concludes, "at the expense of telling honest, authentic, intimate stories" (p. 1318). Jensen (2011) recommends that all posts be the author's authentic opinion, not "overly influenced by the compensation that was provided" (p. 227), and that motives and any financial consideration be disclosed. These studies offer qualitative insight into audience sentiment towards commercially-driven blog posts. My research aims to empirically address this concern.

The theoretical frameworks of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) and audience commodity (Smythe, 2001), as described above, both apply to the mommy blogger phenomenon and were used to develop the variables for this research. For example, cultural intermediaries require "a degree of authority - their constructed meanings and personal lifestyles must carry credibility if they are to be taken up by others" (Smith Maguire, 2014, p. 20). It's hard to promote a baby product, if you don't have a baby; it's hard to legitimately endorse a product if you haven't actually used it. They must write with a "perfect sincerity which is essential in order to be believed and there-

fore effective" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 578). With respect to audience-as-commodity, several studies (e.g.: Ismail & Latif, 2013; Jensen, 2011; Li & Suh, 2015; Rieh et al; 2014; Yang & Lim, 2009) look at determinants of credibility, including transparency, relatable content worthy of sharing and interactivity between the influencer and their audience; factors why a follower is likely to return, or share the content to help broaden the influencer's reach. And as mentioned, the more followers, the more audience they can commodify, the more pay they can demand.

Research objective

To empirically evaluate the relationship between disclosure and the existence of paid branded content to the authenticity of the author's narrative on parenting through the identification, tabulation, and quantitative analysis of elements of both authentic content and branded content.

The overarching research question: What happens to a blogger's narrative when a commercial relationship is present? Sub-questions:

- RQ1: Are the elements of disclosure and brand being identified by bloggers, and how are they being identified?
- RQ2: How are the elements of authenticity impacted when disclosure of commercial interest and discussion of brand are present in a blog's narrative?

Method

An exploratory quantitative content analysis of 30 of the top mommy blogs in Canada was used to determine the linear association between disclosure and brand mentions to elements that demonstrate authenticity. Quantitative content analysis is defined as "a research technique for the systematic, objective, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berleson, 1952, p. 18; see also Baran, 2002). While qualitative research (Hunter, 2016) of audience sentiment identified authenticity was being lost at the expense of branded content; this research used quantitative methods to verify the conclusions with objective research, necessary to get the attention of industry and policymakers, and missing in what was in 2017, the emergent and controversial matter of paid content. This research was designed to build

a better case for review of the business model that promised authenticity as the means to influence, in exchange for pay. This research presents as exploratory until further statistical models can be employed for additional validity. Approval by a research ethics review board was not required because all posts were public.

Sample and sampling procedures

The sample for analysis was 30 of the top English-language mommy bloggers in Canada, based on the highest number of Unique Visitors Per Month (UVPM), excluding French-language, aggregate sites and/or sites that did not have content between December 2016 and May 2017. The list was generated from Cision's database of social media influencers. Considered the world's largest media database company, Cision had a list of 1,300 bloggers, classified as mommy bloggers in Canada. The bloggers in this category could be any gender as long as they wrote lifestyle and product content about parenthood. The unit of analysis was a blog post entry and the analysis included the first 10 blog posts on the home page of the site as seen during the data collection period, with the exception of two bloggers; in these cases, five blog posts were evaluated. Of the 290 public blogs analyzed, three were written by men, and were included.

Data collection and analysis

Two coders were trained and agreed upon the coding criteria to achieve an inter-coder reliability of .97 on a portion of the sample (five blog posts of eight bloggers). Data collection took place between April 11, 2017 and May 5, 2017. For the data collection, 18 variables were coded for each blog post based on the categories of commercial intent, authenticity and cultural intermediary status and audience-as-commodity; all derived from literature.

Variables for commercial intent included disclosure presence, placement and prominence. Measures of commercial content included brand presence, and volume of brand mentions in both text and images.

Variables used to measure authentic voice included mention of their own children, description of life events, inclusion of personal photographs,

and volume of personal pronouns. These variables were based on elements of authenticity found in literature reporting why women blog: by connecting through shared experiences, frustrations and interests (e.g.: Zappavigna, 2013). Using these variables would demonstrate the absence or alteration of “the gritty, banal details of their lives” (Hunter, 2016, p. 1318), to evaluate if a blogger is describing the product with a personal narrative or speaking the voice of the brand. Qualitatively this tone was observed as well, documented in a separate column with the numerical variables. Personal opinion of product/service, and clear indication the blogger actually used the product were coded. All of these elements are measures of both authenticity and a blogger’s ability to claim influence as a cultural intermediary. “They are tastemakers and legitimation authorities because of their personal investment in their work” (Smith Maguire, 2014, p. 22). The aim was to quantitatively assess: can I relate to the content because it uses a personal story of you and your kids? Is it useful to my own lifestyle? Did you write it with you own opinion and own distinct voice?

To evaluate the blogger’s ability to sell her audience as a commodity, measures included number of comments and shares, and blogger engagement with comments. These are based on variables identified as elements of credibility (the cornerstone of their business model), including content that is deemed worthy of sharing (Ismail & Latif, 2013) and high levels of interactivity between the blogger and her audience (Li & Suh, 2015; Yang & Lim, 2009). The presence of contests was an additional measure of engagement.

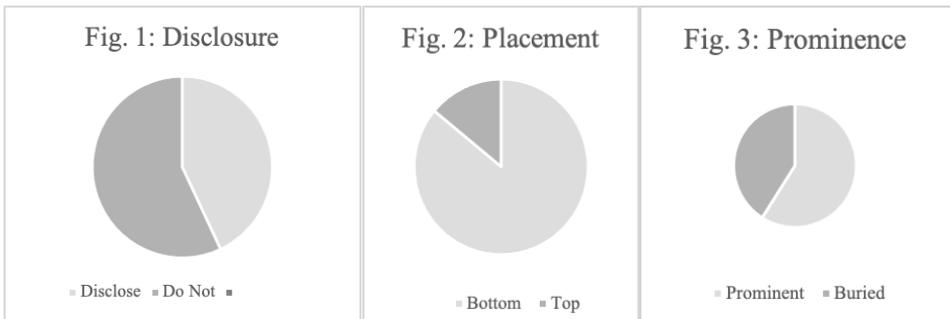
Qualitative observations as well as exact wording of disclosures were documented. These observations included tone of content, including content that read more like advertising copy than personal testimony; and content that promoted the blogger’s personal business. For example, one blogger promoted her line of essential oils. The primary researcher has more than 25 years of industry experience as a public relations professional. This experience enabled the researcher to detect changes in tones, style and grammatical form that indicate generic text written by an agency versus the flow, tone and cadence of the blog writer’s personal style.

The analysis used inferential statistical calculations applying the Pearson correlation coefficient (bivariate) to measure the strength of the relationship between variables: a small-strength association is 0.1 to 0.3; medium is 0.3 to 0.5 and large is 0.5 to 1.0. Descriptive statistics determined trends based on the sample.

Findings (see Tables 1-2)

RQ1: Are the elements of disclosure and brand being identified by bloggers, and how are they being identified?

Bloggers who disclosed, did so prominently. However, fewer than half (43.0%) of the sample disclosed; of those, 41.0% of disclosure was buried and 85.8% of the disclosure was at the bottom of the blog post, meaning readers had to read the full blog post before confirming it was paid content. This called into question the efficacy and application of the guidelines by Advertising Standards Canada (ASC) requiring bloggers to fully disclose any commercial partnership. Many of the disclosure statements were ambiguous, leaving the reader to decipher the difference between ‘sponsored,’ ‘brought to you by,’ and ‘ambassador,’ for example. Some bloggers did not disclose on the individual post, but instead included blanket disclosure statements in a tab on the blog site, further suggesting that even though bloggers are disclosing, the audience is the last to know. Qualitative observations and descriptive statistics were supported by a correlation (.284; p-value significant at 0.01 level) between disclosure and placement; and .791 (p-value 0.01) strong correlation between disclosure and prominence. In order to generate a higher correlation for placement, bloggers would need to disclose at the top of the blog post, before their audience reads ahead.



Exploring the variable of the mention/presence of a brand allowed an analysis of correlation between commercial interest (brand inclusion) and authenticity (personal stories). There was a strong correlation between disclosure and mention of brand at .521 (p-value significant at the 0.01 level) to reveal that disclosure was happening when a brand was discussed; though only 58.6% of the sample disclosed when a brand was mentioned and 72.9% of the sample mentioned a brand. Interestingly, there was a negative correlation (-.142; p-value at 0.05) between disclosure and a contact me feature (the contact me feature had to include an offer to accept payment from brands) suggesting that a blogger doesn't have to actively promote themselves as a paid influencer on their own blog for payment to be offered. Arguably, to be authentic one needs to be transparent, yet the data clearly showed that the directive to disclose was far from consistently applied and could be confusing for the audience: If a brand was mentioned, was it in fact paid, or was it a genuine unpaid endorsement? On sites where there was no disclosure but talk about a brand, it was unclear if it was a paid, undisclosed relationship, or an authentic endorsement. This is contrary to what Ehm (2015) argued, that "digital audiences are savvy - they assume the blogger is getting paid when they mention brands" (p. 11) and presented some challenges for policymakers to consider.

Table 1

	<i>Place- ment</i>	<i>Prom- inence</i>	<i>Brand Men- tion</i>	<i>Con- tact Me</i>	<i>Men- tion of Kids</i>	<i>Author Used</i>	<i>Clear Opinion</i>	<i>Per- sonal Images</i>	<i># of Shares</i>	<i># Com- ments</i>	<i>Con- tests</i>
<i>Disco- sure</i>	.284**	.791**	.521	-.142	.139	.134*	N/S	NS	.216**	.136*	
<i>Brand Men- tion</i>					N/S	.225**	N/S	NS	.141*	.212**	.308**
<i>Brand Images</i>								0.133*			
<i>Con- tests</i>										.570**	

N/S= not significant

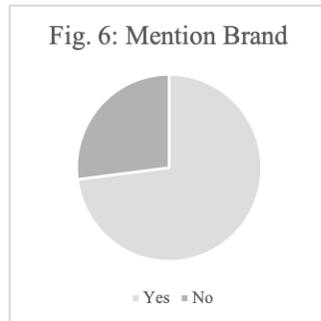
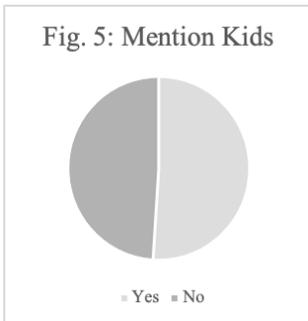
**Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

RQ2: How are the elements of authenticity impacted when disclosure of commercial interest and discussion of brand are present in a blog's narrative?

Qualitatively, there was an obvious difference in tone and message when brands were mentioned that made it clear that discussion of brand and authenticity were not always mutually compatible. This was supported by the quantitative analysis to reveal authenticity was being compromised when brands were promoted. For example, when blogs were more authentic, more personal pronouns were used with stories of the author's family; when brands were mentioned, third person references were made (any mother, children).

The negative impact on authentic narrative because of commercial interest presented when using the measure of talking about their own children. Stories such as the one about why a blogger's son has to use a fidget spinner (a popular gadget in 2016-17 to help children focus in class) make the blogger relatable, creating a sense of trust with the audience that comes by being authentic (Grose, 2012; Hunter, 2016; Mendelsohn, 2010). Yet, only half of the blogs analyzed (50.7%) mentioned their children; 49.3% did not, suggesting some blogs about motherhood were not necessarily related to motherhood at all. When variables of 'mention brand' and 'mention kids' were correlated, there was no statistically significant association suggesting that if a blogger was talking about brand, she was not talking about her kids. There was a very small (.139), but statistically significant (p-value at the 0.05 level) correlation between disclosure and the mention of children. These findings confirm the qualitative results of Hunter (2016) regarding the takeover of commercial content at the expense of personal stories. In the absence of using a shared narrative about the entertaining, humiliating or infuriating aspects of motherhood (Zappavigna, 2013), bloggers risk losing their connection to, and consequently their ability to commodify, their audience. In the battle of brands versus babies: brands were winning.



By most measures, when correlating variables of commercial intent, either brand mentions or disclosure, with variables of elements of authenticity, there is only a slight or not statistically significant association. For example, both disclosure and brand with life events (no correlation); disclosure and brand with use of personal photos (no correlation). This suggests bloggers are not using personal stories when discussing brands. An example that best demonstrates how the brand is winning over the personal narrative is this:

“If you’re hosting multiple parties, you can keep the festive colours looking new and radiant throughout the holiday season by using Oxi-Clean™ Colour Shield Laundry Stain Remover. It helps to fight tough stains (think red wine and gravy) while safeguarding colours.”

A quick web search of this quoted material indicates that it was repeated either verbatim or quasi-verbatim in many blogs (Google, 2020). To make this example more authentic, it might have instead told a story about the author’s child spilling mommy’s precious red wine on the tablecloth being used for a holiday party and OxiClean came to the rescue. The passage was typical of many branded posts wherein the author’s real life was of little value – or mention – to the branded message.

In the sample being analyzed in 2017, there were many instances of brand promotion overpowering the personal narrative. Two bloggers had exactly the same branded content, word-for-word, with the exception of the first paragraph, for example. One post stands out when this does not happen: the blogger disclosed that they received a free winter coat to review and then told the story of when they wore it, how warm it was and showed a picture of them wearing the jacket while playing with the kids. This blog contained all of the elements of an authentic post: personal story, mention of kids, personal photos, personal pronouns, tried the product, and gave personal opinion; all while disclosing. But these types of posts were rare. In fact, there was a negative but not statistically relevant correlation between the amount of personal pronouns to the amount of brand mentions; hinting that as brand mentions go up, personal narrative goes down. The fact that it was a negative, not positive, correlation was the real revelation. When correlating personal images (photos of the blogger’s children and/or blogger; no stock images) with the presence of brand images, there was a weak (.133) correlation (p-value significant at the 0.05 level). Only 29.8% of posts evaluated contained what were clearly personal photos. These weak or no correlations further suggest that, in the battle of brands versus babies, the brands were winning.

Table 2*

	Dis-closure	Place-ment	Prom-inence	Men-tion Kids	Per-sonal Photos	Life Experi-ences	Clearly Used Product	Clear Opin-ion	Brand Men-tion	Blogger Engage-ment	Con-tests
Present/ Clear	43	60	59	51	30	40	59	63	73	84	22
Not Present- Buried	57	40	41	49	70	60	41	37	27	16	78

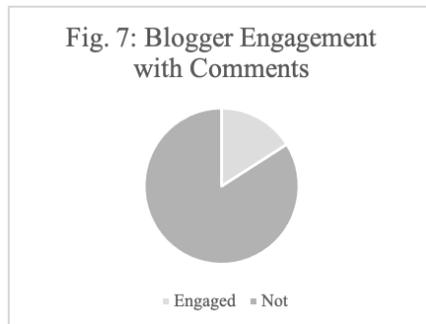
*Based on 290 blog posts, belonging to 30 of Canada’s top bloggers who posted May 2017 back through to December 2016.

Arguably a blogger would have to actually use the product in order to form an authentic and influential opinion, important for a reader to trust that opinion. This also speaks to the credibility of the source and their status as a cultural intermediary, which Bourdieu (1984) categorized as someone who can be a guarantor and a participant in the product they endorse. Findings suggest the legitimacy of the blogger as an influencer was present, but weak: 72.9% blogs in the sample mention brand, 58.7% had clearly used the product, and 63.2% expressed a personal opinion in their blog, which are numbers you would expect to be higher when promoting a product. There was no correlation between either brand mention or disclosure to evidence the author had a clear opinion of the brand, despite assurances in disclosure statements that ‘opinions are my own’. There was a small (0.134; p-value significant at 0.05 level) correlation between disclosure and the variable of the author clearly used the product; and a stronger correlation (.225; p-value at 0.01 level) between ‘brand mention’ and ‘author used’. While there may have been no doubt that one blogger who announced her pregnancy used the e.p.t. pregnancy test kit that sponsored her post, the fact a brand had infiltrated such a personal disclosure made it seem far less authentic. These findings support the need for influencers to be clearly and unequivocally using the product as intended for a duration of time that would warrant a credible endorsement.

Fig 4: Used Product



Finally, findings relating to the ability of the blogger to sell her audience as a commodity, even with disclosure and branded content, suggest credibility of mommy bloggers existed, albeit at fairly low levels, and were highly contingent on the presence of contests to incentivize the audience to engage. Of the blogs analyzed, 83.7% did not have any blogger engagement with reader comments. It is important to note the strong correlation (.570; p-value 0.01 level) between comments and the presence of contests; 22% of blogs evaluated contained contests for which readers must leave a comment (often after being instructed to first visit the brand's website). A medium-strength association of .308 (p-value at 0.01) existed between brand mention and contests, suggesting contests are an important component to engage readers with branded content. If you exclude comments as a result of contests from the mix, there is no correlation. With no or low audience engagement when branded content was disclosed, a blogger's credibility was jeopardized, stripping away the sense of community essential to relatable and authentic content. The real warning here: "Bloggers are only as good as their credibility - so much is based on word of mouth these days, both online and offline, that without a positive reputation, influencers can kill their own businesses" (Ehm, 2015, p. 9).



The quantitative and qualitative findings of the research presented in this paper attempted to answer the question posed by Wu (2016): Can mom blogging "retain its original roots ... primarily about community and authenticity that coincidentally leads to economic and professional gains, or has the commodification of these blogs already robbed them of their authentic communal benefits?" (p. 49). In 2017, the data supported the conclusion that authenticity was being robbed, offering a cautionary tale to the public relations industry and to influencers. In the absence of authenticity, the audience that is being commodified may turn away and look for their community and content elsewhere, a danger raised by Ehm (2015) and Perlmutter and Schoen (2007).

Future research

The use of inferential Pearson's correlation coefficient offered insights suitable for exploratory research. Additional statistical modelling to test the relationship between categorical variables should be conducted for further validity. This research did not include other social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube and Facebook and as contractual relations between brand and influencer now usually involve postings on multiple sites this is an opportunity for future research. French blogs were also not included in the analysis. Future research might also look at mommy blogs from a feminist lens; with roughly half of bloggers actually mentioning their children, are these bloggers appropriating motherhood for the sake of attracting brands? And for those who are using their children, what are the long-term implications for the children when their social media footprint is littered with brand endorsements? It may also be of value to qualitatively assess audience opinion of branded content on different platforms; do they care more when they are reading in long form, such as a blog than they do when they see an image on Instagram, for example?

Conclusion

An increase in brands wanting access to social media audiences coupled with lax regulations unable to monitor and enforce disclosure of branded content continues to create a dilemma for the public relations industry as well as for what are now referred to as influencers. The influencer industry is still relatively new but it is evolving and growing at a rapid pace. This research and the variables analyzed can easily be extrapolated for all influencer categories and is as much a cautionary tale now as it was at the time of analysis three years ago. At risk for all is losing the audience who turn to influencers for credible opinion and authentic stories. Audiences can easily 'unfollow' and without an audience to commodify (Smythe, 2001), the blogger's business model is in jeopardy. This research suggests the presence of branded content does not depend on having an authentic voice, yet credibility does (as long as there are contests).

With this research, public relations practitioners are encouraged to re-search the appropriateness of influencer to represent the brand and negoti-

ate a stronger association between authenticity and brand. Contracts must insist influencers clearly demonstrate their or their family's use of the product, and talk about the brand be done with an authentic and personal narrative to maintain the bonds of trust and support between influencer and audience (Blanchard, 2006, Lopez, 2009). For policymakers and the audience who subscribe or follow these influencers: disclosure may be ambiguous and inconsistent. Regulators need to insist not only on disclosure but where and how it is worded for maximum transparency. In the meantime, readers are urged to watch for #sponsored, #ad or other such #paid identifier to be sure of the content's intent. And finally, influencers are urged to maintain a balance between authenticity and brand; the two need not be mutually exclusive. There need not, nor should, be a battle of brand versus babies, of winners and losers. It's not an either/or but an essential both. Getting it right with authenticity will validate cultural intermediary status to maintain the legitimacy and credibility of influencer, their business model and the billion-dollar influencer industry.

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