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# Navigating the Food Blogosphere: Finding a Place for Feminism in a Highly Feminized Blogosphere

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**Navigating the Food Blogosphere: Finding a Place for Feminism in a Highly  
Feminized Blogosphere**

by

Jenna Hanson

A Thesis

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### **Abstract**

I authored a food blog, *Yum.*, in my early twenties. A food blog is a sub-genre of lifestyle blogs, and many lifestyle blogs are written by women for a predominantly female audience. From the outside, I projected myself as a confident young woman ready to conquer the culinary world; on the inside, I felt constrained by a genre that demanded perfection and set unrealistic standards for women. Added to this pressure the fear I would not be taken seriously as a writer because I wrote about food and entertaining—what I considered to be feminine endeavors. I was conflicted about my role as a writer, and I believe this internal conflict I felt when writing in a highly feminized space is worth exploring. Why did it seem as though femininity and feminism could not coexist in my food blog? A critical analysis of my past blog entries through a feminist lens helps me to reconcile my past as an unenlightened feminist. I believe increasing instances of food blogs that are overtly both feminist and feminine might help to redraw boundaries and establish a genre that is more up-to-date and welcoming of more women's voices.

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### A Girl and Her Blog: Yum.

In my early twenties, I authored a food blog. My blog, *Yum.*, chronicled my trials in the kitchen as a newlywed. *Yum.* was everything I thought a food blog should be: clean and feminine with a sprinkle of humor. My blog posts contained the requisite high-resolution, dreamy photos of recipes I meticulously staged on clean white platters. It was the early 2010s, and my blog was a near carbon copy of other food blogs I admired. From the outside, I projected myself as a confident young woman ready to conquer the culinary world; on the inside, I felt constrained by a genre that demanded perfection and set unrealistic standards for women. Adding to this pressure was the fear I would not be taken seriously as a writer because I wrote about food and entertaining—what I considered to be feminine endeavors.

Figure 1 is an example of my attempt to mimic popular food blogs I admired. Drenched in morning sunlight against the

backdrop of a paisley tablecloth, my French toast looks like the quintessential breakfast. In the text, I explain to readers that this particular breakfast dish was a departure from my everyday breakfast of cereal and fruit. I speak lovingly of the cream cheese filling and how, when combined with breakfast sausage, it makes

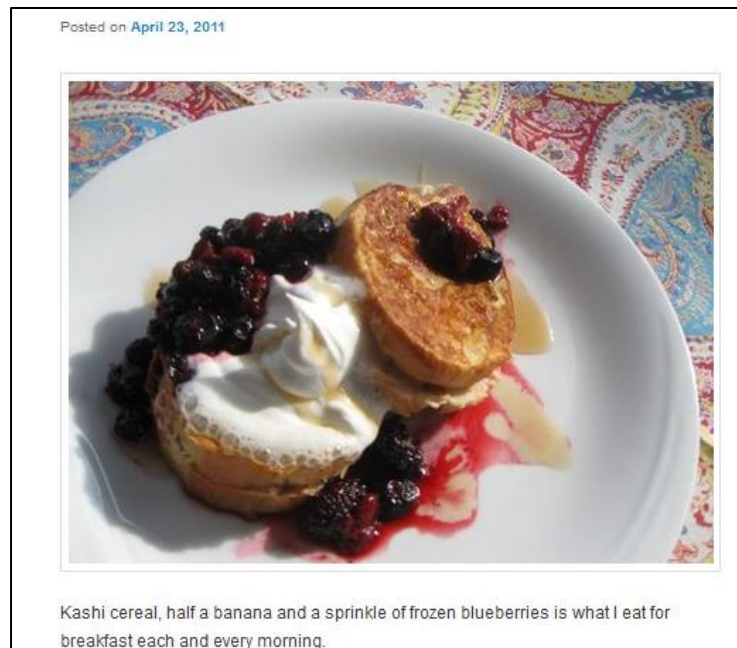


Figure 1. “Habitual routine can stand a wake-up call” *Yum*

a divine combination of salty and sweet. I go on to write about how I would happily recreate the dish for guests at my own home: “This breakfast? I’d make for any overnight guest without hesitation. After this enchanted pre-Easter breakfast I’m going to make an extra effort to keep whipped cream cheese in the refrigerator” (Hanson). A number of my blog posts from *Yum.* are similar in tone to Figure 1; the posts portray a picture-perfect meal, summarized with text to suggest the process was equally as pleasant. To say I enjoy cooking was not a lie, and it still is true for me today. However, as I reflect on this particular blog post, I regret that I did not use the space to challenge the status quo. For example, why do women put pressure on themselves to create perfect meals for guests?

Figure 2, “Deviled for a reason,” is another blog post from the *Yum.* archive. Similar to Figure 1, Figure 2 is a carefully curated image of food, staged on a clean plate. Figure 1 and figure 2 differ in that the tone of my writing for this post is slightly more agitated. As an example of my agitation, I describe the process of cooking deviled eggs as such: “I spent way too much time trying to remove tiny shell fragments from my egg yolks. In the process I somehow managed to tear the whites of nearly every egg I boiled.” Here, I am more honest with my readers; the



Figure 2. “Deviled for a reason” *Yum*

facade of a happy homemaker begins to crack like the eggshells in my recipe. Despite my frustrations spelled out in words across the computer screen, my images of hard-boiled eggs still depict perfection. As I reflect on this post, I felt compelled to portray myself as a happy, dutiful wife. After all, this seemed to be the standard M.O. for the food blogs I followed.

Finally, Figure 3, “Not-so-pleasant pheasant,” is a blogpost in which I both describe and portray my cooking experience as miserable. In this particular post, I explain to readers the bad luck I had in preparing pheasant. The finished dish looks unappetizing, as evidenced by Figure 3, and I

describe the process to readers as disappointing altogether. In the text of the post, I compare my prepared pheasant to petrified wood. Despite my best efforts to be transparent about

the experience, I still

remember the time I spent to

maneuver the pheasant onto a clean white plate for the photo. In other words, even my errors were carefully curated in order to align with other food blogs I admired. These three examples provide a brief foray into my past experience as a food blogger. My food blog chronicled my highs and lows in the kitchen, but even my misfires in the kitchen were still presentable in the sense that I was meticulous in staging the finished product.



Figure 3. “Not-so-pleasant pheasant” *Yum*



For the several years I blogged regularly, I received relative popularity in the regional food blogosphere; this was due in large part to the connections to a larger blogging community I had working as a reporter for the local newspaper. This exposure was gratifying, exhausting and terrifying, all at the same time. The fruits of my labor for *Yum.* were instantaneous with each new post. In many ways, my food blog seemed like a natural extension of the articles I wrote as a reporter. I loved writing about human interest stories—particularly stories for women, about women. I welcomed opportunities to cover topics like food, health, travel, fashion and beauty. While I was proud of the accolades I received for my blog, part of me wanted to keep my identity concealed, for fear of not being taken seriously as a professional for writing about cooking. In retrospect, I believe my research question developed out of this uneasiness I had for the highly feminized topics I covered, both as a writer and food blogger: why does it seem as if femininity and feminism are incompatible?

### **Food Blogging: More than Meets the Screen**

My blog, despite its relative popularity, was hardly unique in the burgeoning lifestyle blogosphere of the late 2000s. In fact, I copied this formula from dozens of other lifestyle blogs I admired. When I started *Yum.*, a handful of food bloggers had already been catapulted into mainstream stardom, landing book deals, endorsements and television series on popular culinary channels. Ree Drummond, more commonly recognized by the name of her blog as *The Pioneer Woman*, became a household name due to the popularity of her food blog. I admired Drummond and closely followed her blog. In one particular post, Drummond wrote that a successful food blogger must publish a new post daily. I challenged myself to this ideal of posting each day, despite the demands of my full-time employment and personal life. I held

myself to the same unrealistic standards as women like Drummond, and I nearly exhausted myself in the process.

As a food blogger, I had more on my plate than just preparing meals; I had to be a writer and a photographer, as well. I soon learned food blogging was not as easy as the glamorous women behind the blogs made it out to be. What food bloggers did not reveal in their posts is that food blogging prolongs the cooking process nearly triple-fold. I had to continually interrupt the cooking process to capture the most flattering photo opportunity. Once the dish was recipe was ready, I had to transfer it to a clean plate, and stage the photo all over again. By this point in the process, the food was far from edible. Once I had my photos, I had to upload them to my computer. Only after these painstaking steps were completed would I begin my favorite part: the writing. I wanted writing to be the star of each blog post. As much as I enjoyed cooking, it was writing that had always been my creative outlet. Unfortunately, the expressive qualities of writing I loved were stifled by the genre.

I realize now, as a late twenty-something, that my obsession with my food blog was bordering the unhealthy. As I read past passages from the blog archive, I am easily able to identify the undue stress and anxiety I buried beneath the shiny veneer of my food blog. In a number of posts, including Figure 4, I make light of panic attacks I experienced as a result of the stress of blogging and hosting a bridal shower. In retrospect, I wish I would have used the blog post to challenge why I felt pressured to the point of a breakdown.

The reality of my life at that time was no laughing matter. Physically, I was at the lowest weight I had ever been. I would often lie awake at night, ruminating about my next blog topic. I worried about when I would find the time to work on the blog, and how my new

blog post would be perceived by my followers. I began experiencing anxiety attacks, until I was ultimately diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

How did the pressures of food blogging spiral out of control? My carefully curated blog persona hid the fact that I was insecure about my blog and also suffocated in a genre that did not seem to tolerate real, honest expression.

Cooking and entertaining are feminine activities; as such, I was critical of myself for writing about domesticity in a patriarchal society that devalues femininity.

Despite the pejoration of domesticity in

Western culture, I



I'm pretty sure I'm suffering a mild case of early-onset strata anxiety.

All the signs are present: shortness of breath, heart palpitations and insomnia.

Saturday morning, 40 or so bridal shower attendees will be at my doorstep expecting brunch – and I'm so afraid I'm going to disappoint.

Figure 4. “Practice, practice, practice” *Yum*

enjoyed reading about feminine topics in the blogosphere. Cooking, decorating, fashion, pop culture, fitness—I had an insatiable appetite for these kinds of topics. I realize now, with my more feminist sensibilities, that there is not anything wrong with enjoying feminine activities. The problem is that in the food blogosphere, unrealistic standards and reinforced patriarchal gender norms are left unchallenged.

Because I genuinely enjoyed domestic hobbies, I became engrossed in a world of lifestyle blogging. Interestingly enough, the more lifestyle blogs I followed, the more inadequate and insecure I felt. As much as I enjoyed lifestyle blogs, I often felt conflicting emotions whenever I perused my favorite blogs. One woman's blog post about a new recipe could make me feel motivated and inspired on the one hand, yet inadequate and self-conscious on the other. I had developed a complicated relationship with lifestyle blogs, and I questioned the plurality of my experience: was my experience unique, or do many female bloggers feel the pressure to adhere to the standards of the food blog genre?

Lifestyle blogs became one giant contradiction for me. Were they "good" because they allow women to connect with other women and express themselves through writing? Or, did they reproduce unattainable, upper-class ideals and reinforce patriarchal gender norms? On the one hand, lifestyle blogs written by women and for women offer a space for women to express themselves and connect with other like-minded women. I was conflicted about my role as a writer, and I believe this internal conflict I felt when writing in a highly feminized space is worth exploring. Why did it seem as though femininity and feminism could not coexist in my food blog? A critical analysis of my past blog entries through a feminist lens helps me to reconcile my past as an unenlightened feminist.

I did not self-identify as a feminist as an early twentysomething. In fact, I had no idea what it meant to be a feminist. While I may not have identified as a feminist at the time I started my food blog, I felt conflicted when I blogged about feminine topics and also constrained in a genre that celebrated perfection. In the time since I started my food blog, with sustained exposure to feminist theory in graduate school, I have become more familiar with feminism. Going forward in my life, I am committed to feminism and feminist practices. I see

blogs as a kind of resource for reconciling my pre-feminist and current identity, and gaining insights associated with defining feminism within and against femininity. I now understand feminist cultural criticism, is not, as Susan Bordo describes, “a blueprint for the conduct of personal life....and does not empower women to ‘rise above’ their culture or to become martyrs of feminist ideals” (30). In other words, to claim the feminist label does not mean I need to eschew femininity.

My original research question began as this: Can a blog be both feminine and feminist? I believe I always knew the answer to this question was yes. However, I want to better understand why it seems as though femininity and feminism are mutually exclusive in the food blogosphere. In other words, if it is okay for me to write about preparing a roast chicken dinner for my husband, why does it feel as if I am betraying feminism? The result, I believe, will be a revealing construction of myself and the lived experience I have felt both as a woman and as a blogger.

### **The State of the Blogosphere**

Blogging emerged in the late 1990s, and at that time, men initially dominated the blogosphere. My own extended exposure to the blogosphere did not occur until the late 2000s, which coincides with the emergence of countless blogs written by and for women. Prior to that time, I considered blogging to be the domain of tech-savvy teenage boys. However, blogging platforms like Blogger and Wordpress made creating and updating blogs easy for women and men of all ages; I created *Yum.* using Areavoices, a free and easy-to-use blog platform promoted by the local newspaper where I worked as a reporter. Blog hosting sites provided women and men with the opportunity to blog without a high technical aptitude. As a result, the web’s gender gap narrowed until women younger than 30 had outpaced men online

(Chen 172). The thousands of lifestyle blogs authored by women that emerged during the late 2000s is evidence of the narrowing gender gap online.

As an impressionable young twenty-something, what was troublesome for me was the fact that it seemed *so many* women authored beautiful blogs about their beautiful lives. In hindsight, this should come as no surprise, considering 8 million women were blogging by 2009 (Chen 172). Women were blogging in a big way, especially about topics traditionally considered feminine. Not only were millions of women writing blogs by the late 2000s, but they were reading blogs, as well. According to one study, about 40 percent of American women read blogs (Matchar 50). What were women writing about on this new digital medium? Women were writing and reading about traditionally feminine topics. A 2009 study showed that the five most-read blog topics were, in order of popularity: life/family, entertainment, food, health/wellness, and recipes/cooking (Matchar 51). All of these statistics point to the fact that women were blogging, women were reading blogs, and women were blogging about topics which fell into a more feminine domain.

### **Lifestyle Blogs**

Lifestyle blogs do not have a formal definition per se, but this type of blog has characteristics unique from other blog genres. In its purest form, I define lifestyle blogs as a type of personal blog, written by women for a female audience. This is a narrow definition of a lifestyle blog; men certainly write blogs about lifestyle topics, and women write blogs about topics considered to be more masculine. Yet for the purpose of my analysis, I will examine lifestyle blogs written by women, for women. A lifestyle blog may run around several different topics, but the primary focus of the blog is the author's personal life. My own blog was no exception: my blog was about cooking, but I revealed details about myself beyond the

realm of the recipe I was trying. In hindsight, these details were surface-level and did not exactly challenge the expectations of the blog genre.

Lifestyle blogging, and all of its sub-genres, is an effect of a more-recent phenomenon known as “New Domesticity.” Emily Matchar, author of *Homeward Bound*, coined the phrase, and defines it as the fascination with reviving lost domestic arts like canning, bread-baking, knitting, and chicken-raising. New Domesticity, and many of the feminine topics it encompasses, includes exactly the topics I wanted to read and write about. As I researched lifestyle blogging and Matchar’s New Domesticity, the terms became interchangeable: both lifestyle blogs and New Domesticity focus on traditionally feminine topics, including fashion, parenting, home decor, crafts, and food.

Lifestyle blogs not only explore feminine topics, but they also create a certain feminine aesthetic. Matchar accurately describes the mood or appearance of a lifestyle blog as containing “very romantic, soft-focused, aesthetically pleasing images of home life, that is very DIY, very home-oriented and nostalgic” (qtd. in Hilgenberg, 44). Many mainstream lifestyle blogs, like *Eat Yourself Skinny*, are carefully styled, with high-resolution photos and decorative, scrolling fonts (Figure 5). The woman writing the blog, then, takes on qualities which Hilgenberg describes as a “contemporary, superwoman version of a stereotypical 1950s housewife” (Hilgenberg). This dream-like, halcyon quality of lifestyle blogs was a source of inspiration and conflict for me. As much as I enjoyed reading and writing about the highly feminized topics often found in lifestyle blogs, it seemed as though the genre did not allow for personal growth and exploration. Additionally, I mistakenly assumed that in writing about feminine topics, I was somehow disappointing feminists in a major way. In my limited knowledge about feminism, I thought earlier feminists had worked hard to ensure women had

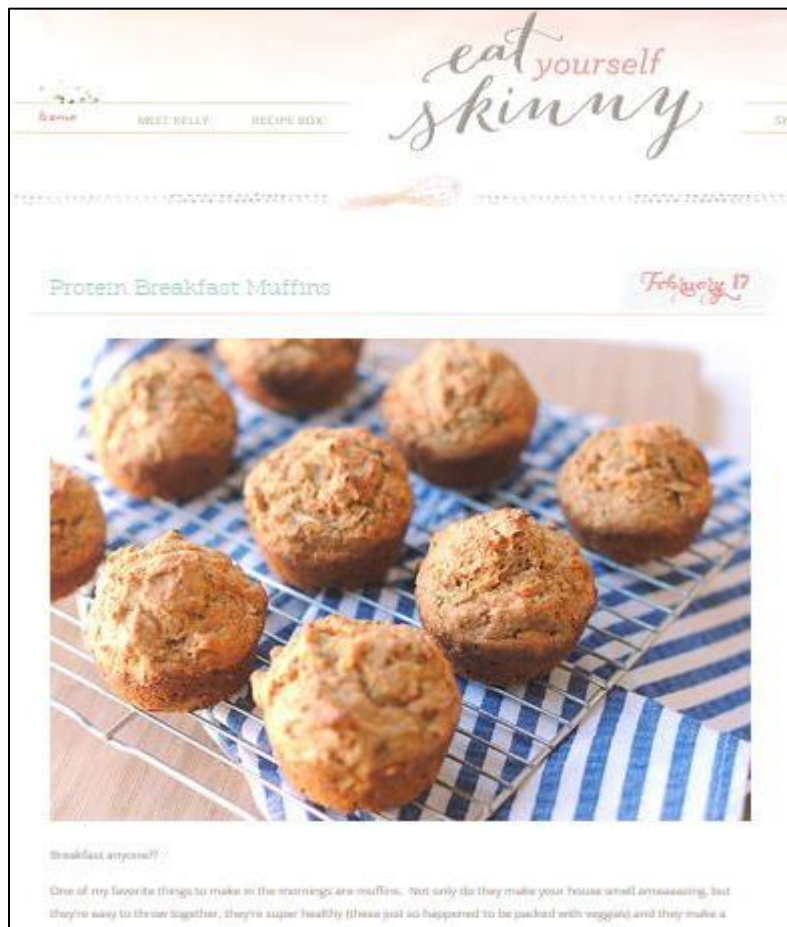


Figure 5. “Protein breakfast muffins” *Eat Yourself Skinny*

## Food Blogs

Food blogging is an overwhelmingly female enterprise. When it comes to food blogs, a Washington, DC-area survey showed that 93 percent of local food bloggers were women (Matchar 102). For the purpose of my research, I will narrow my analysis to food blogs. The food blog is a popular subgenre of lifestyle blogs. The food blog subgenre is one I have the most experience with, as I authored my own food blog for several years. The main focus of a food blog is cooking, but women incorporate other facets of their lives into their blog posts, often related to health, entertaining, and parenting. I need look no further than my own blog to

professional options beyond homemaking. I felt as though if I wanted to be taken seriously, both professionally and as a feminist, I should not partake in the lifestyle blogosphere and its highly feminized language and symbolism.



find evidence of this. As an example, the blog post to the right I wrote shortly before I hosted a bridal shower for a close friend (Figure 6). The food blog genre was an outlet that allowed me to write, but only about a circumscribed topic; rarely did I stray from the topic of cooking.

As it turns out, not all food bloggers felt the same pressure to write only about food. David Lebovitz, famous chef and author of *Living the Sweet Life in Paris*, writes that he felt more inclined to write about a variety of topics. Lebovitz says: “The more I think about it now, the more I realize that my site (or any food blog) is not just about food, cooking, and recipes. It is thoughts and stories that we want to share, some involving food and recipes, but not always.” This flexible definition allows for many topics to emerge in a food blog, and it also is proof that food blogs are not wholly a female endeavor. However, the female domination in the food blogosphere presents challenges to male food bloggers like Lebovitz. As my research will show, food blogs written by women rarely veer from the topic of food and entertaining.

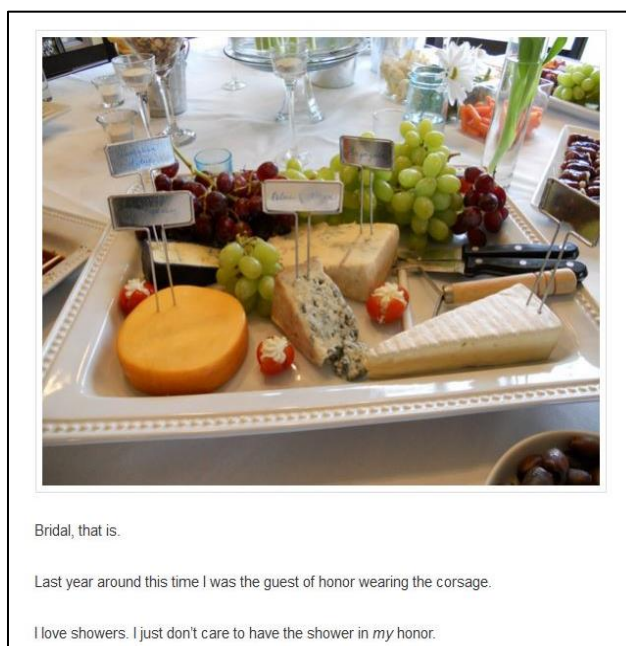


Figure 6. “April showers bring May: another shower?” *Yum*

Kevin, author of the blog *Kevin is Cooking*, speaks to the challenges males experience in the feminized food blogosphere. In a post titled “Confessions, observations and challenges from a male food blogger’s perspective,” Kevin says he is “felt like an outsider and a minority” in the world of food blogging because he is a man. In a comment to Kevin’s post, a

fellow male food blogger praised Kevin for inspiring a “new dude food blogger” to enter the food blogosphere, adding he said he feels like “the only dude on the block.” The lack of male food bloggers may stem from the gender norm that says cooking is women’s work. As an example of the gender bias in the food blogosphere, Kevin said the food blogging template he wanted to download from a popular blogging site was detailed as such: “creative and clean with a feminine flair.” This is evidence of the food blogosphere’s propensity to tailor to female authorship and readership; it also suggests a digital environment that is feminized and circumscribed.

### **Food Blogs under the Feminist Lens**

As I began my research in an attempt to answer my research question, it became evident that I was not the first researcher and blog consumer to question the place of blogs written by women, for women. The fields of psychology, communications, gender studies, sociology, and rhetoric, to name a few, have researched blogs and their impact on women. Scholarly journals including *Computers in Human Behavior*, *Journal of Women’s History*, *College English*, and *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* have researched the topic of women and blogging. However, I noticed a major gap in research where food blogs were concerned. This gap in research provides the opportunity for me to analyze food blogs with a feminist perspective. The goal of my analysis is to understand both the opportunities food blogs provide for women, as well as the shortcomings. In identifying the opportunities and shortcomings provided by food blogs, I hope to answer my research question: If a blog can be both feminine and feminist, why does it seem like the two are mutually exclusive or incompatible?

### **Interconnectedness, Intense Personal Bonding and Self-expression**

I believe it is first important to understand why blogs are valuable from a feminist perspective. Generally speaking, blogs written by women allow for an interconnectedness between author and readers, foster intense personal bonding, and allow a space for self-expression. However, a critical analysis of food blogs suggest that food blogs do not offer these same benefits to women as other blog genres. Food blogs may have escaped a more critical feminist analysis as a result of their newness, or more likely, because they are often overlooked as a category of lifestyle blogs written by women, for women.

Blogging, by its very nature, is considered to be a modern-day journal or diary. Viewed in this way, it is easy to see how blogs allow women to connect with other women regardless of geographical, religious, and political borders. However, a critical analysis of food blogs suggests that food blogs do not allow for the same kind of support and community as provided by other blog forums. I would argue that food blogs allow women to connect, but the nature and content of food blogs do not allow for the same kind of intense personal bonding that is more prevalent in other lifestyle blog genres. Food blogs generally stick to surface-level topics; most comments and feedback from readers praise or thank the blogger for sharing particular recipes or experiences. Food bloggers may seek advice from readers, but questions rarely diverge from the topic of food. I found this to be true for my own blog, as well as the food blogs I followed.

Much has said about the benefits of the female-authored lifestyle blog and the ways in which this space affords women an interconnectedness to one another. As an example, consider Andrea Lieber's research of lifestyle blogs written by women of Jewish Orthodox faith. Lieber's research found that women with blogs sought a community of peers with

whom to discuss private matters (662). Unlike diaries from earlier generations, blogs are accessible to millions of readers once a post is published. As a result, a Jewish Orthodox woman living in Brooklyn is able to connect to the stay-at-home-mom living on a farm in rural Nebraska. This interconnectedness between women bloggers allows for an intersectionality of voices that would otherwise not cross paths. Food blogs, however, rarely touch on topics outside the realm of food. This is problematic for women who do not venture outside the food blogosphere; women only reading food blogs may not feel as though they live up to the unrealistic expectations set by food bloggers who write and photograph food for hobby, rather than out of necessity.

In a similar vein, Matchar considers the intense personal bonding that occurs in the lifestyle blog community to be “a digital shoulder to cry on in hard times” (55). Not only are women connecting through blogs—they are supporting each other, as well. In many ways, lifestyle blogs have become a support network for women who otherwise do not have access to a physical support network. As an example, a woman who experienced a miscarriage might blog about this experience and connect with thousands of other women who have experienced miscarriages. This personal bonding allows for a recognition of a plurality of experiences in the blogosphere. However, to return to the food blog, the common experience being published is that of the woman who has time and wherewithal to cook and blog at her leisure.

This is not to say that women do not support one another and connect on food blogs. In fact, in the food blogs I follow, and in my own experience, food blog comments are most often supportive and positive. Much has been said about cyberbullying and internet trolls in recent years, and it would seem as though a blog is a bullseye for people wanting to criticize and post harsh comments. However, this harsh commentary is generally not found on food

blogs. As an example, consider the comments posted on a blog post entitled “Sweet potato gnocchi recipe” on the popular food blog *Iowa Girl Eats*. Of the 45 comments posted to the post, all were positive (Figure 7). Notice, comments are supportive for the blog author.

Lifestyle blogging, in addition to connecting women, opens the doors for women to express themselves like never before. Lieber describes blogs as representing a new kind of

“public” private—

one that facilitates

an extraordinary

opportunity for

self-expression

(662). Viewed in

this way, lifestyle

blogs provide an

outlet for women to

not only have a voice,

but also to connect with

other peers. Women are using their blogs to discuss deeply personal and private subjects.

Matchar’s research illustrates how women today use blogs to not only talk about life’s

ordinary miseries, but also to admit deeper, darker secrets women of an earlier generation

may have internalized (55). Subjects once considered too taboo to discuss with anyone other

than a priest—subjects like sex, depression and weight struggles—are topics that are openly

discussed in many lifestyle blogs.

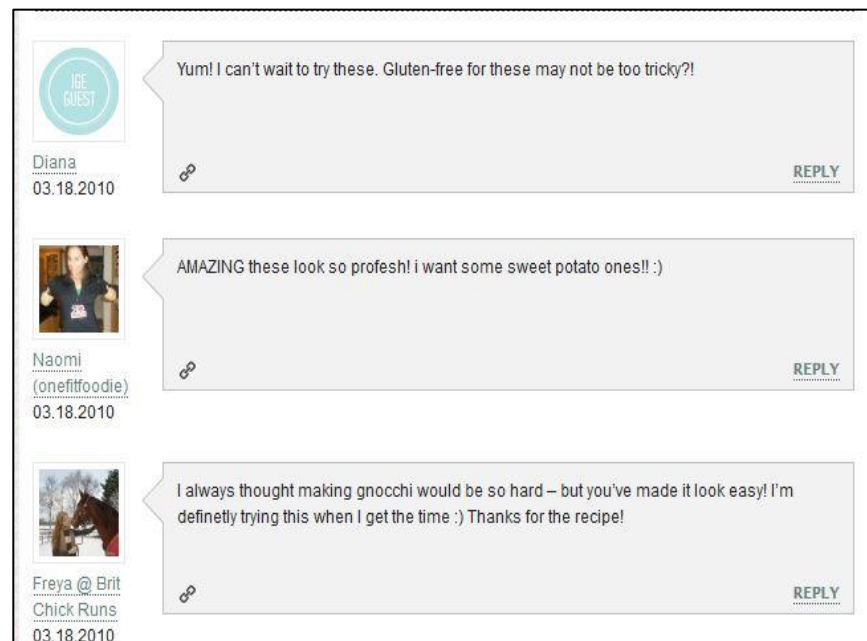


Figure 7. Comments from *Iowa Girl Eats*

In a recent study, 93 percent of 750 participant female bloggers said they express feelings of pressure in their blogs, thus indicating they may share their depression with others in their writing (Ko 78). Self-expression is a common hallmark of a lifestyle blog, and many women consider their blogs to be a creative outlet in which to verbalize their frustrations in life. Writing is considered to be a coping mechanism for depression and anxiety, and therefore it should come as no surprise that blogging is linked to a greater overall sense of well-being. Matchar reiterates this claim, and says that bloggers invite thousands into their inner circle of trust when they write about things like marriage struggles and financial instability (66). The public blogosphere allows for thousands of strangers to view and comment upon private and personal experiences. Essentially, blogging requires a high level of vulnerability; the reward, however, is that in expressing the everyday frustrations of life on a blog, the writer will gain support from a wider audience. In the blogosphere, the larger a readership net is cast, the more likely a woman is to connect with other women going through a similar experience.

To further support the claim that blogging enhances self-expression, Lieber's research into the highly nuanced Jewish Orthodox women's blogging community found blogs provided the women in her analysis with a mechanism for coping with complicated feelings by extending the boundaries of conversation (631). In other words, women could seek the support of women outside of their own neighborhoods, churches, and communities to express thoughts and feelings they might not otherwise feel comfortable sharing to their immediate social circle. Feminism highly values community and support networks, and in many ways, food blogs allow women to connect in unprecedented ways. For me, blogging was not about sharing complicated feelings. It felt to me as if complicated feelings did not belong on a food

blog. Despite research from Lieber, Ko and Yang-Kuo, and Matchar, I did not feel as though my blog allowed me to connect, express myself or bond with other women. Instead, my blog felt like more of a space to adhere to the existing feminine archetype of happy hostess and homemaker. The food blog genre felt constrained and cookie-cutter.

When I review my food blog entries now, with more feminist sensibilities, I see that I did not use blogging as a way to work out complicated feelings or frustrations with being a woman. As strange as it seems to admit, it did not occur to me that I could use my blog to challenge patriarchal gender roles. As an example, I write in my blog about feeling stress to host a bridal shower, but I do not challenge the fact that I felt pressured to host a bridal shower in the first place. I believe the food blogosphere perpetuates this double-standard for women in regards to hosting and preparing food for family and friends. I did not question the source of the stress as wrong or unfair. I simply recreated blog posts. To return to my research question, though I know feminine and feminism are not mutually exclusive, it did not occur to me to use my food blog as a place to challenge patriarchal gender norms.

What does this mean for food blogging? Did other food bloggers experience a greater overall sense of well-being and interconnectedness with readers? Research does not address how women specifically use food blogs to express complicated feelings. I experienced a greater overall sense of well-being as a result of my blog, but it was not because I was using my blog for self-expression. Instead, I believe my blog enhanced my well-being because of the false sense of external validation I received from my readers. It felt good when people took notice of my blog and of my writing. It felt good to receive comments and emails from people saying they enjoyed reading my blog. In retrospect, the validation I experienced was not intrinsic; it was dependent upon the acceptance and approval of others. Today, I see this

dependence on the need for approval as a detrimental to feminism. Matchar explores this need for external validation from female bloggers, as she explains how blogging about a recipe is a way to gain validation for making the nightly dinner, an underappreciated nightly chore. It would make sense that millions of women would turn to their blogs to seek validation for the work they do as mothers and homemakers.

Ree Drummond, author of *The Pioneer Woman*, writes often about how her recipes are received by her family. Figure 8 demonstrates how her “surf and turf” pasta received the

stamp of approval from her husband: “Marlboro man loved this dish,” Drummond writes of her meal. She describes the inspiration for the recipe coming from her husband’s comment about a restaurant commercial on TV. Drummond says of his comment, “All I knew is, he had seen a food he liked.

And I had to make it

happen.” However, what does this need for validations

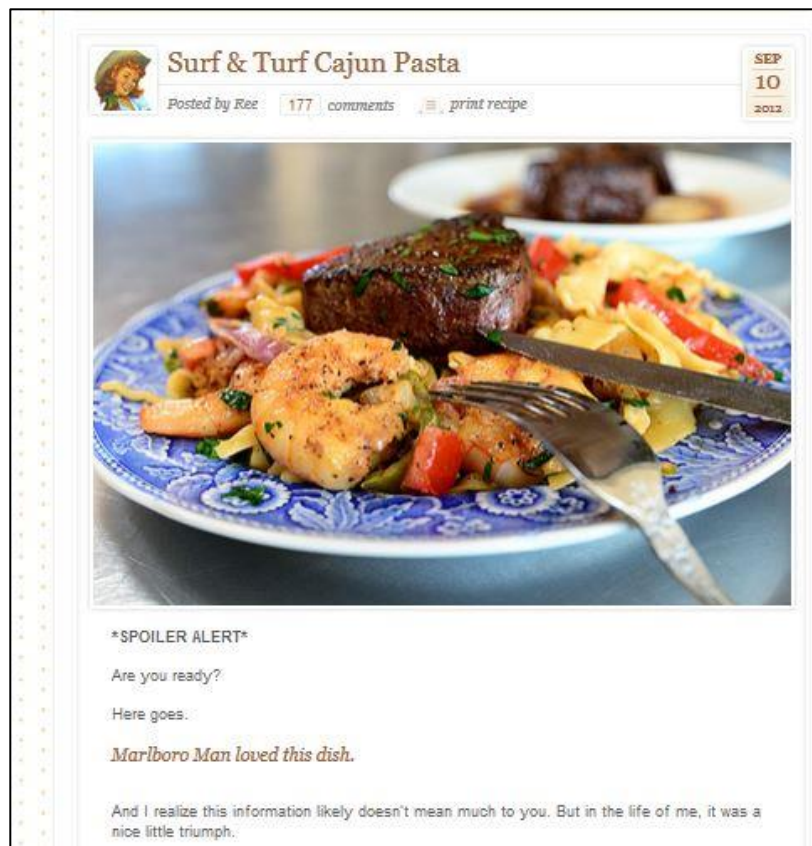


Figure 8. “Surf and turf Cajun pasta” *The Pioneer Woman*



say about our modern society? Drummond implies her worth as tied to how successfully she is able to please her husband. Here, like elsewhere in the blogosphere, bloggers feed on the external validation brought on by their food blogs.

It is difficult to argue the value of a medium which provides women with the ability to connect with other women, express themselves, enhance their well-being, and offer validation for tasks that otherwise go unnoticed or unrewarded. I can validate this claim from my own experience as a blogger; the ability to publish my work to an unknown blogosphere of readers is both fulfilling and purposeful. With each new post to my blog, I had an appreciative audience who wanted to hear what I had to say about cooking. In that regard, my experience as a blogger was surreal. Suddenly, people cared about what I had to say. Below, Figure 9 shows my blog being featured as a recommended blog to check out for the Areavoices blog platform. For me, blogging was about the opportunity to write and be heard. I used my own blog to share personal struggles and self-doubts within the realm of cooking, and I found the feedback from readers to be reassuring. However, looking back on my experience, I felt constrained by the genre; I did not feel as though I could use the space to sort out feelings that were simmering underneath my polished blog persona.



Figure 9. Featured Areavoices *Yum*

I believe there is an opportunity for a sustainable feminist space when blogging is viewed from these positive perspectives. However, the food blog is more limiting than other blog genres in that it does not allow as much self-expression, interconnectedness and personal bonding. Research on blogs written by women, for women, may overlook certain aspects of food blogs; I believe the existing research is missing the bigger picture when it neglects to speak about the homogenizing effects of food blogs. This research also overlooks major shortcomings of lifestyle blogs, including the artificiality, lack of representation, and the reinforcement of gender norms.

### **Food Blogs: Unrealistic and Hyper-feminized**

As my blog grew in popularity, it became a false reality I could not maintain. I worked feverishly to post as often as *The Pioneer Woman*'s Ree Drummond recommended, but I fell short. I did not have the time to write and promote my blog, nor did I have the money to purchase requisite technology and broadband internet. I did not have the time, resources, or wherewithal to invest in my blog. Unlike *The Pioneer Woman*, I did not have a team of professionals helping me to produce and maintain my blog. In addition to my economic disadvantage, I did not have the sustained exposure to feminist or sociocultural theory like I do today. I did not know how to reconcile the fact that my blog did not live up to the expectations of *The Pioneer Woman* and other blogs like hers. Herein lies a major problem with lifestyle blogs: they set unrealistic standards for women. As I think back on my experience, what I find even more troubling is that countless other women, just like me, must have felt the same sense of inadequacy.

Unfortunately, today's more popular lifestyle blogs would have women believe that the lifestyles portrayed are reality. To read a lifestyle blog, according to Matchar, is to,

“inhale a curious combination of unvarnished honesty and high-gloss fantasy” (69). The problem with this combination of honesty and fantasy is that many women are not able to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. I believe this gets right to the heart of why lifestyle blogs can be problematic in terms of portraying a false reality: a lifestyle blog is at the same time authentic and artificial. While lifestyle blogs allow a peek into the private lives of strangers, it is easy to forget that oftentimes these glimpses are carefully curated by the authors. Matchar says the way a blog is presented as the blogger’s natural state of living blurs the line between reality and fiction for many readers (65). My 23-year-old self could not make out this distinction, and my expectation of reality did not match what I read and saw in the food blogs I followed.

Today, I am better able to recognize that the lifestyle portrayed by blogs is one that is highly controlled by the blogger. When I look back at my own blog, I see artificiality at every turn. The food in all of my photos was carefully handled on clean white plates, as evidenced in Figure 10. I took hundreds of photos of each recipe, and filters were applied to the photo I selected for the post. Normal life in my kitchen looked nothing like the images I posted to my blog.



Figure 10. “The last [cheese] straw: a lesson in simplification” *Yum*

Perhaps even more alarming than the artificiality of my staged photos is the fact that I posted these photos with no regard as to how my photos would be perceived by the average reader.

The issue of perception raises another major concern for lifestyle and food blogs. As research shows, millions of women read and write blogs. However, when it comes to lifestyle blogs, who are these women writing? Do they represent a diverse group of women? Unfortunately, the answer is usually no. This lack of representation of female voices is a major concern for my research. Something I had not considered prior to beginning my research is the lack of equal access the blogosphere offers for all women. While it is true anyone can create a blog, the “digital divide” disadvantages people without access to the internet. May Friedman’s research analyzed one particular blog in which the author was forced to disband her blog for weeks and months at a time because she could not pay her internet bill. Friedman’s point to this particular scenario is that this reality is not uncommon for many women. Maintaining a food blog requires far more than a reliable internet connection. Many food bloggers share information about the professional photography equipment and editing programs they use to blog. As could be expected, this requisite technology is expensive. Friedman says, “Since poverty is not randomly experienced, this problematic situation ensures that experiences from other non-normative social locations are minimized: people with disabilities, people of color, and people from developing countries, specifically, are greatly underrepresented” (204). Without a doubt, certain minority groups are not equally represented in the blogosphere.

According to Jen Schradie, author of “The trend of class, race, and ethnicity in social media inequality,” educational level also plays a part in the digital divide with regard to blog

production. Put simply, Schradie's research found that Americans with lower educational levels continue to be less likely to blog (561). Her research further concludes that people with less than a high school education are 50 percent less likely to blog than people with college experience (563). Higher incomes, according to Schradie, are associated with a higher likelihood of blogging. Schradie's research suggests that blogging is not the democratizing platform society so often considers it to be.

With many minority groups left out of the blogosphere, I am forced to return to my question: Can a blog be both feminine and feminist? It seems as though the white, educated, middle- or upper-class women are perceived as normal; consequently, these bloggers with normative identities are considered the most popular. A feminist analysis would undoubtedly consider this lack of access and diversity in the blogosphere as problematic.

Research into the "mamasphere," a sub-genre of the lifestyle blog written by and for mothers, has shown that this lack of diversity has negative implications. According to Friedman:

The chief threat to the integrity of mommyblogs as an accurate representation of contemporary motherhood comes not from any individual mother who fictionalizes her experience, but rather in the general lack of recognition within the mamasphere that there is not equal access to it for all mothers. (203)

Lack of access, according to Friedman, is of even more concern than the fact that women are not portraying real life in their blogs. Women writing popularized lifestyle blogs are generally of a certain privileged socioeconomic status, and evidence suggests this normalizes experiences of an advantaged population.

One privileged experience that is normalized in the lifestyle blog genre is that of the stay-at-home-mom. Many women who blog write of their past careers and professional lives

before they married, settled down, and started a family—as if this scenario is an option all women have. Matchar describes this exodus of women bloggers from the workforce as the “opt out” option. She explains, “Bloggers write their opt-out stories into the narrative fabric of their blogs in a way that suggest careers are overrated” (68). Matchar’s point is that many lifestyle bloggers voluntarily leave the workforce and blog as a hobby. The problem with this scenario is that for many women, “opting out” of a career is simply not an option.

As an example, consider Ree Drummond, the author of the *Pioneer Woman*. Her blog became hugely popular, complete with book deals, a Food Network show, and soon a Hollywood movie option (played by Reese Witherspoon). However, what many readers do not know about Drummond is that her husband is the largest landowner in Oklahoma (Fortini). While not all lifestyle bloggers live as affluently as Ree Drummond, many are financially well-off and have time and resources to invest in their blogs. Their blog becomes a site to explore their newfound identity as a mom and housewife. This is a common narrative that emerged from many of the lifestyle blogs I followed in my early 20s. The repetition of this narrative made this “opt-out” lifestyle option seemingly mainstream.

Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns about the dangers of the narrative of the single story, like the narrative repeated in lifestyle blogs. In a TED talk from 2011, Ngozi Adichie says, “Stereotypes are incomplete; they make one story become the only story.” Ngozi Adichie goes on explain how the single story begins to sound like truth when it is repeated: “Show a people as one thing, and only one thing, and that is what they become.” Viewed in this way, it is easier for me to understand how the single story of white, educated, middle-class heterosexual, stay-at-home-mom is normalized in the blogosphere. When reading lifestyle blogs, I read this single story over and again, until all lifestyle blogs seem to

share this narrative. In retrospect, I made unrealistic, self-defeating comparisons between my own blog and the blogs written and maintained by women who had both money and time to invest in their blogs.

I believe I was keenly aware of the privilege required to maintain a food blog, and by maintaining my own blog, I was fulfilling this prophecy. The fact that I did not own up to my privilege in my blog is problematic, and is perhaps why I did not feel comfortable blogging about domestic, feminine topics: it seemed to proclaim to my readers that I lived a problem-free, privileged life. I see my blog today as a space in which I fretted over living up to some assumed standard and not at all as a forum to acknowledge the pressure and object to the societal conditions exerting this pressure.

With so much of today's research focused on the mommyblog genre, I wonder what this lack of representation means for the food blogging culture? I believe this same unrealistic, homogenous ideology is reinforced in the food blogosphere, as well. Specifically, I believe many mainstream food blogs project the idea onto women that cooking ought to be an enjoyable endeavor. Artful images that depict step-by-step instructions for each individual recipe seem to project the idea that cooking is a process to be relished—as if the time a woman spent in the kitchen is proportionate to how much she loves her family. In reality, not all women naturally love spending time in the kitchen. According to Matchar, “The expectation that cooking should be fulfilling for everyone is insidious, especially for women” (114). Many women do not view cooking as a constructive use of time. In fact, many women do not care for cooking at all and leave the task entirely to their spouse or partner. The food blogosphere, however, gives readers the perception that the joy of cooking is both normal and natural for women.

Not only does the food blogosphere convey the message that cooking is fun, but I believe it also perpetuates the idea that time-intensive recipes using organic, fresh ingredients are preferred above anything else. This philosophy is not only a major time constraint for women, but it is also more costly. Research has proven that millions of Americans living in low-income rural and urban areas lack access to healthy, affordable food (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation). Recipes in the food blogosphere that normalize and even glorify recipes which call for expensive ingredients may bring on unnecessary guilt and feelings of inadequacy for the women who simply cannot afford or cannot access those ingredients.

In addition to setting unrealistic standards for women and normalizing the lifestyles of privileged women, lifestyle blogs are problematic in that they reinforce patriarchal gender norms. Judith Butler's theory of performative acts explains how lifestyle blogs achieve this reinforcement of gender norms, despite the fact that Butler's theory arrived 20 years before the first blog post was published. Simply stated, Butler describes gender identity as a stylized repetition of acts (519). This has a unique application to lifestyle blogs, which I have described thus far as highly stylized and repetitive in terms of content and format. In other words, a lifestyle blog is a careful selection of stylized images and edited thoughts. Lifestyle blogs, specifically blogs which focus on domestic life, may serve to reinforce women's normative roles as nurturers. As an example, consider Figure 11, a screenshot taken from the blog *The Naptime Chef*. Kelsey Banfield, the writer and chef behind the blog, writes many posts about entertaining. In this particular post, "3 Naturally Delicious Cheesy Recipes for Labor Day Entertaining," Banfield writes of how Labor Day weekend marks the end of summer entertaining for her, and that in the coming weeks, she will be in "full school mode." While there is nothing inherently wrong with entertaining, Banfield's post suggests she



spends a great amount of her summer playing hostess for various events. When I started my food blog, I tried to imitate the women in the food blogs I admired; I modeled the look, feel and tone of my blog to match the blogs that were already mainstream.

Butler's theory brings new meaning to Holly Hilgenberg's definition of lifestyle

bloggers, in that they are coming to resemble a contemporary, superwoman version of a stereotypical 1950s housewife (1). Popular lifestyle blogs are a repetition of women performing domestic tasks, essentially reproducing a historical situation. It is interesting that Hilgenberg draws the parallel of lifestyle bloggers today with 1950s housewives, because Butler describes gender as an act which has been, "going on before on arrived at the scene...an act which has been rehearsed" (526). This seems to me to be the glaringly obvious problem with lifestyle blogs: they present women performing acts from a scene which has been rehearsed since Eve took the first bite of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In maintaining my own blog, was I reinforcing gender roles and ultimately serving a patriarchal



Figure 11. "2 naturally delicious cheesy recipes for Labor Day entertaining" *The Naptime Chef*

agenda? I now believe that without using my blog to challenge and question these static gender norms, I was.

Perhaps what is most troubling about this is that the blogosphere continues to tell the narrative of the enlightened happy housewife, yet the female-dominated genre does not seem interested in thwarting these societal expectations. I admit, I was a part of the problem. Was it because I did not hear voices of other women challenging the status quo of the lifestyle blog that I did not confront these challenges in my own blog? I was altogether critical of lifestyle blogs because they set unrealistic standards, they normalize the privileged, and they reinforce gender norms. I want to deconstruct these binaries, and I hope to find a voice that is both feminist and feminine.

### **Femininity, Feminism and Blogging**

My research question began as this: can a blog be both feminine and feminist? Thus far, I believe I have adequately identified many of the opportunities and shortcomings the blog genre provides for women. These identifiers, however, do not entirely help me to understand why I believed I could not be taken seriously as a feminist if I wrote about feminine topics like cooking. Despite how silly my original question seems to me today, I had a very real misconception as a young female writer which put these concepts, feminism and femininity, at odds against each other. In fact, my early misconception that I could not be a feminist and write about feminine topics is a major reason why I stopped blogging. I wanted to be taken seriously as a woman and a writer, and I did not feel as though blogging about feminine topics would help me to achieve status and credibility. I believe it is important to explore the tension so as not to criticize lifestyle blogs simply because they cover feminine

topics. Instead, I now intend to explain why it seems as if feminism and femininity are incompatible.

Throughout my research, I have learned that feminism is not to blame for my misconception, nor is femininity. The tension I felt as a writer I believe is best explained by my inability to challenge my frustrations and anxieties in my writing. I now believe that food blogs allow for femininity and the feminist to coexist, so long as the space allows for honest and transparent reflection. On a more macro-level, I believe my early misconception is not unique to me; there are likely many other women like me, hesitant to claim the feminist label while simultaneously feeling inadequate for pursuing feminine endeavors like cooking (and writing about it). I now understand that I do not need to pretend to be less feminine in order to claim a feminist identity. As Susan Bordo explains, I would not need to ‘rise above’ my culture and become a martyr for feminist ideals (30). As I now understand feminism more clearly, it does not work that way.

### **Coming to Terms with My Own Feminine Gender Expression**

This tension I felt between femininity and feminism stems from my early adolescence. Through much of my adult life, my perception was that being a feminist meant I could not be feminine. What informed this perception? Growing up, I had little exposure to feminism; I was raised in a white, working middle-class family in a small town in northern Minnesota. Feminism was not a topic readily discussed around the dinner table. I had little exposure to feminism; though even as a teenager, I was aware of how my gender expression affected the way I was treated by my peers. Throughout high school, I believe I began to understand that I did not fit neatly into society’s definition of feminine. As I transitioned from high school to

college, I began to explore more with my femininity; I transitioned to college as a more ladylike, confident woman.

As an undergraduate in college, I took literature courses which exposed me to the works of Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Charlotte Bronte. Though I still did not identify as feminist, I took an interest in women's literature. The repeated messages of empowerment and independence resonated with me in a profound way. I also greatly admired one of my English instructors, who stood passionately for feminist ideals in four-inch stilettos. It was during this exposure to feminist literature as an undergraduate that I met and started dating my now-husband. I somehow felt as though I distanced myself from feminism because I was in a serious relationship. This was entirely my own misconception, but I felt as though my being in a relationship somehow meant I had "opted out" of feminism. After all, was not feminism about man-hating and female empowerment? Of course it was not, but at the time, I still had a pragmatic understanding of feminism. I relied on the misconception of feminism that pervaded the public sphere, rather than draw my own conclusions about feminism. My understanding of feminism stopped short, and as a result, I believed feminists did not settle down in their early twenties. Feminists were activists, feminists lived in urban areas, and feminists would have balked at my decision to settle down and marry at the age of 22—or so I thought.

I transitioned from college to the real world, marrying soon after and settling down in rural Minnesota. As an early twenty-something, I threw myself into my work as a freelance reporter for the local newspaper. I felt empowered and purposeful in my journalistic role. People in my community started to take notice of my bylines and praised me for my work as a writer. I exposed parts of myself in my stories, writing about social events like a cookie

exchange with girlfriends to more personal topics, like planning my wedding. I enjoyed human interest stories in particular. At this time in my life, I felt the most feminine I had ever felt. I was a wife and I had a home to look after. As independent as I was, I loved domesticity. I loved making dinner for my husband, and I enjoyed making our house a home. It was at this time in my life that I started my food blog, *Yum.*, as a way to share my love for cooking with my love for writing. After several years of blogging regularly, I abandoned the blog altogether.

Several years later, I applied to graduate school. I wanted to earn my graduate degree to fulfill my goal of becoming an English professor. When I started school, I felt like a complete outsider. I felt like the most conventional student in all of my classes. I had more conservative views than most of my new classmates, and unlike many of my peers, I had a full time job and a husband that demanded my attention outside of class. I was self-conscious of my identity in graduate school, and because I felt as though I did not fit in with my more liberal classmates, I questioned whether graduate school was for me at all.

The fact that I had little knowledge of feminism was troubling for me as a graduate student. I sat silently through class discussions about feminism and feminist theory, volunteering little for fear of my lack of understanding being discovered by my classmates. Articles written by Donna Haraway and Nancy Hartsock only further complicated what little knowledge base I had. Feminist standpoint theory? I could not even pretend to understand what this was about, and my annotations from these readings elicited plenty of question marks scratched into the margins. I had little exposure to rhetorical theory—and more specifically, feminist theory.

What does my background have to do with my research question? Why would I need to recount my experiences as a high school student and an undergraduate in order to better understand femininity and feminism? I believe my experience helps me to understand that I experienced gender as a continuum. My gender expression gradually became more feminine as I progressed from teenager into womanhood. Gender is fluid, and acknowledging a desire to be more feminine does not make me any less a woman. Not only did I become more feminine as I transitioned into adulthood, but I liked my increasingly feminine gender expression. The problem for me was that as I became more feminine, I did not reconcile my understanding of what it meant to be feminist.

What exactly do I mean when I talk about being feminine? In my earlier years, I associated feminine with the color pink, frills, and tea parties. As I grew into my teenage years, I associated femininity with elegance, grace, and domesticity. Femininity took on many characteristics over the years, and it was a definition that was often in flux. My definition was heavily influenced by society's definition, which often devalued femininity. In retrospect, it is clear to see how I came to associate femininity with being inferior to or dependent upon men. As an example, politeness is a trait I associated with being feminine. While there is not anything inherently wrong with politeness, it connotes a lack of assertiveness. When I reflect on my misguided definition of femininity, it only makes sense that I felt as though by being feminine I could not also be feminist.

Today, I have a new appreciation for femininity. There is no single definition for femininity; femininity, as Julia Serano explains in *Whipping Girl*, is not a "package deal" (320). To be feminine can mean lots of different things to lots of different people. Feminine women come in all shapes and sizes, and embody countless traits. Problems arise when

society tries to apply a narrow definition of femininity to a diverse group of feminine women. Serano warns of what she describes as “monolithic femininity,” and she says that once we are able to let go of this blanket understanding of femininity, we can see how individual feminine traits arise from different combinations of biology and socialization (321). This modern definition of femininity was femininity as I experienced it—individual traits which arose from both being born female as well as my environment and socialization. Serano’s definition also helped me reconcile the fact that my feminine gender expression has been in flux throughout my life.

I now understand femininity as it relates to me in my own personal experience, but how could I reconcile the fact that I associated femininity with being inferior or less than? As Serano explains, traditional sexism is to blame; traditional sexism functions to make femaleness and femininity appear subordinate to maleness and masculinity (326). Consider weak (feminine) versus strong (masculine), or logical (masculine) versus irrational (feminine). Serrano says these binaries exist to serve sexism. I believe a feminist perspective would be interested in deconstructing binaries to understand why society values masculine traits over feminine traits in the first place. My new definition of femininity includes associations like expressive, communicative, nurturing and inclusive. This is not to say all women must exhibit these traits, nor is it to say that a man should not or is unable to exhibit these traits. I believe my new definition of femininity allows me see how women and men both share unique combinations of all of these feminine traits.

My inaccurate definition of feminism is another cause of the tension I perceived as existing between femininity and feminism. Was this my own misconception, or is this resentment towards femininity a general attitude in feminist circles? I believe my false

perception of feminism stems from the fact that my understanding of feminism was informed by feminist stereotypes. For example, I equated feminism with Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*—a book I had not read, but a book which I understood to put down and belittle domesticity and femininity as the malaise of the American housewife. As such, I came to mistakenly equate feminism with contempt for all things domestic.

Throughout my young adult life, I felt as though my circumstances—white, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual—were too mainstream for me to fully embrace feminism. I felt as though I had not earned the right to identify as a feminist. Quite frankly, I was not sure I wanted the label. Feminism seemed too radical an identity for me, a diplomatic people-pleaser. In addition, I was raised to believe nothing was out-of-reach for me because I was a woman. In other words, I was not sure I even needed feminism.

As I now more clearly understand femininity, and the way in which traditional sexism seems to function to make femininity and femaleness seem subordinate to masculinity and maleness, I understand why I am a feminist. Going forward in my life, I want to empower femininity in order for it to be appreciated just as masculinity is valued in our society. I want my daughter to be confident about her life choices, whether she chooses to marry young and start a family, or become a nuclear physicist, or both. Feminism is about options for women, and this is something I proudly stand behind.

Much to my relief, other people have had similar misconceptions about feminism. Courtney Martin, contemporary feminist scholar and cofounder of *feministing.com*, held this same attitude towards feminism as I did in my early twenties. In a recent TED talk, Martin said she did not readily claim the feminist label because she equated feminism to man-hating and Birkenstocks. In the same way as Martin, I did not want to identify as feminist because of



what I mistakenly associated with feminism. Martin describes feminism as a continuum in that her brand of feminism is different from her mother's feminism, and I believe my misappropriation of feminism has everything to do with the fact that I did not reconcile contemporary feminism with my more accurate understanding today.

### **Femininity Misrepresented**

Why did it seem to me that femininity was the vehicle which perpetuated hegemonic gender norms? I built my definition of feminism upon my understanding of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*. According to Serano, this book, "Helped reinforce a notion that would appear repeatedly throughout unilateral feminism—that femininity (or at least certain aspects of it) is an artificial, man-made ploy designed to hold women back from reaching their full potential" (331). Here, Serano points specifically to unilateral feminism as the source of negative attitudes toward femininity. At this point, it is important to point out that feminism is a broad umbrella which covers countless different branches of the feminist movement. To say that all feminists are critical of femininity is as ridiculous as saying all women are feminine. It is more accurate to say feminists critique certain constructs of femininity. Two criticisms of feminism that often emerge include the notion that femininity is artificial and femininity is a man-made ploy. In both instances, femininity is seemingly responsible for reinforcing gender norms. To explore these misconceptions in-depth might help better understand why some feminists have a distaste for femininity. I believe I may also have bought into these same misconceptions about femininity, which is why I was self-conscious of the content of my food blog.

The argument that femininity is artificial is rooted in the traditional sexist notion that certain aspects of femininity exist for the pleasure or benefit of men (Serano 327). Other

feminists, like Judith Lorber, view motherhood as, “the covert coercion to put men’s and children’s interests before their own” (171). In Lorber’s view, women would not choose to stay home and raise children. As a woman, I can understand why some feminists may feel as though femininity is artificial. When I was a teenager, my feminine gender expression was not as natural. I did not feel comfortable in makeup, nor did I have an interest in traditionally feminine activities. However, as I became more comfortable in expressing my femininity, it felt more natural.

Unfortunately, our patriarchal society has devalued feminine traits. As an example, consider childcare. According to Lorber, emotional labor like child-rearing is not highly valued in Western cultures (159). In the same vein, Lorber says, “Full-time or part-time motherhood for women implies some economic dependence on a man, whose manhood is linked to being economically successful enough to support a wife and children” (170). In other words, the role of the stay-at-home mom is inferior to a working husband in the paid labor market. Viewed this way, it is no wonder that as a young woman, I thought less of women who did not work outside the home.

I believe there is great harm when society devalues femininity. One consequence of this devaluation is that it gives the impression that masculinity is a natural expression. It is important to note here that many feminists who critique the construct of femininity are equally as critical of the construct of masculinity. As Serano explains in her book *Excluded*, when feminists buy into the ideology that women should strive for masculine-associated qualities as natural, they do a disservice to femininity because the reciprocal feminine qualities were not natural or something to strive for. When femininity is devalued, patriarchy prevails. To put this into perspective, my interest in fashion and makeup is no more artificial

than my husband's interest in hunting. Along those same lines, my interest in strength training is no more legitimate or real because it is a more masculine endeavor. To think about this in terms of food blogs, a blog about food should be no less valued than a blog authored by a woman about politics. Perhaps the women who have condemned femininity for being artificial do so because they may have found traditional gender roles constraining or unnatural. There was a time in my life when expressing femininity did not seem natural to me, and so I can understand how women may feel threatened by feminine lifestyle blogs that do not align with their interests.

Just as the construct of femininity is believed to be artificial, so is the notion that the construct of femininity is self-presentation for men's benefit. When I first read that some feminists believed the latter to be true about femininity, I was defensive. I was defensive because I believe my blog was an easy target for feminists to critique because many of my posts were written about a meal I made for my husband and me. However, I did not write my blog in order to please my husband, nor did I cook food solely for the purpose of pleasing my husband. In fact, if you were to ask my husband, he would likely say our relationship was strained during the time of my food blog for the fact that I devoted much of my time and energy into the blog. We both suffered from the demands of patriarchy. To say women perform domestic activities for men's benefit is inaccurate, and I believe it is a detriment to women who genuinely enjoy tasks commonly considered feminine.

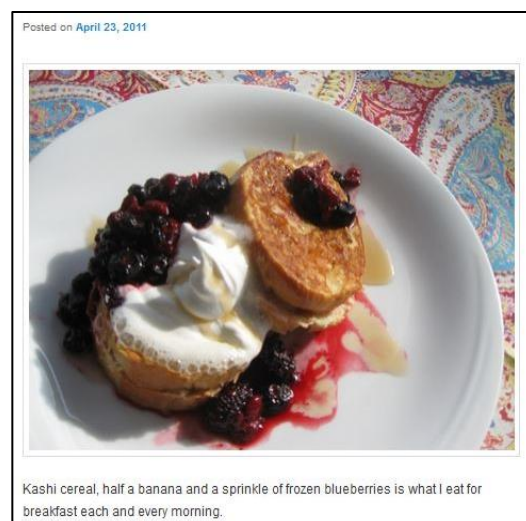
I enjoyed my blogging about cooking, just as thousands of other women just like me enjoyed blogging about things like decorating, fitness, parenting and gardening. I do not believe it is a coincidence that many women gravitate towards femininity. For me to believe that feminists view femininity as artificial or for the benefit of men is inaccurate; feminists are

critical of the construct of femininity and the way in which it is devalued in society. My misconception about feminism is insulting to women who feel naturally inclined to express their feminine gender expression. Not only is this insulting, but I believe this may also turn women away from feminism for fear of exclusion. As Serano explains, “by embracing femininity, society will finally be able to reach out to the vast majority of feminine women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past” (343). As a young woman, it seemed as though I could not be feminine and feminist at the same time; I had to choose to be one or the other. As I became more educated about feminism, and more confident with my femininity, I now understand that this is not true.

### **A Return to *Yum*.**

I have identified the opportunities and shortcomings of food blogs. I have also explored the tension that arose from my misunderstanding of feminism and femininity. I will reintroduce blog posts I analyzed earlier in my work, applying a more critical feminist lens to my writing. Additionally, I will draw upon more of my own blog posts that help me to reconcile my former understanding of feminism with my current identity as a feminist.

In revisiting Figure 1, I find problems with my writing from a feminist perspective. The point I was trying to make in this blog post was that I indulged in a highly caloric breakfast and cheated on my diet. The tone of my writing is meant to be funny, but there is nothing humorous about my preoccupation



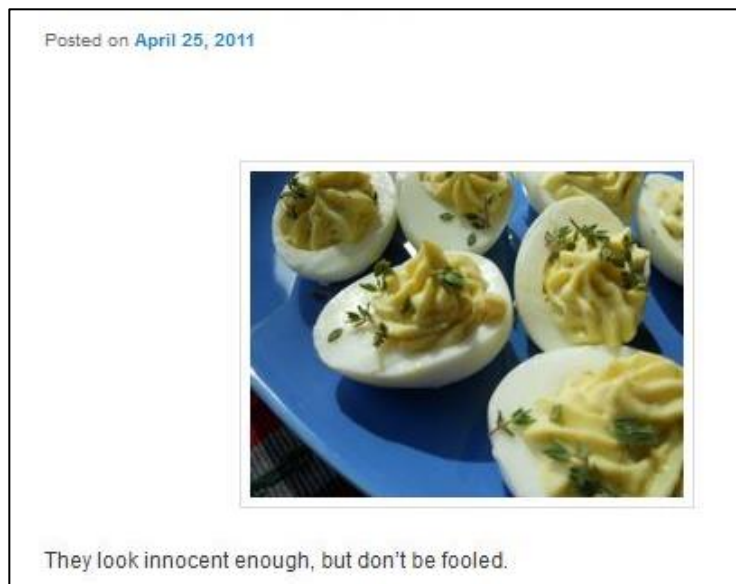
with diet restriction. I wrote of the experience: “Now I can enjoy Fench toast with ease. But adding a thick layer of cream cheese and jelly between two slices is like adding insult to injury. Why was my mom trying to sabotage what I try so hard to keep in check?”

Later in the post, I acknowledge my need for control makes me seem like a “lunatic” and that I was in need of a reality check. However, I end the post with a remark about my plans to return to my strict diet: “Some habitual routines are certainly worth breaking. My Kashi cereal will be waiting for me Monday morning.”

Returning to this post now, as an enlightened feminist, I see problems with the fact that I neglected to challenge this mindset. I use self-deprecating humor to joke about my diet restrictions, but I do not take the conversation any further. In hindsight, I feel as though this was a missed opportunity to challenge the misappropriated guilt and shame I felt. When I admit to loving the meal, I write: “Once I came to my senses, I was astounded by how much I lavished this breakfast.” Today, I find it troubling that I considered *not* eating the breakfast. The fact that I “lavished” the breakfast speaks volumes about my attitude towards food and how I used it to both punish and reward. In a similar vein, I believe it is worth noting that I make no attempt to challenge or explain why my husband did not assume the same guilt with eating a big breakfast. Instead, I only direct the shame onto myself.

Despite my inability to challenge the situation, I see the underpinnings of a feminist voice in my writing. I believe this is suggested in the title of the post: “Habitual routine can stand a wake-up call.” I was not totally unaware of the coercive mechanisms of patriarchy at play. However, I missed an opportunity to challenge my attitude and use my writing to explore the tension. A more critical feminist lens on my blog posts uncover countless tensions with the current status quo, with no call to action.

Figure 2, “Deviled for a reason,” is a post I wrote about deviled eggs. As the title of the post suggests, it was not a pleasant experience for me. I believe I am better able to establish a feminist voice in this post, as compared to the previous post, because I am more honest and transparent about my struggle to make deviled eggs. I write, “I spent way too much time trying to remove tiny shell fragments from my eggs. In the process



I somehow managed to tear the whites of nearly every egg I boiled.” In this post, like other posts from my blog, I sense frustration in the unrealistic standards society places on women. However, while I write about the tedious and time-consuming aspects of deviled eggs, I did not use the post as a space to challenge why I felt pressured to make deviled eggs in the first place. Instead, I wrongfully seem to place the blame and pressure on myself for the fact that my eggs were not turning out.

Of more concern is the fact that I still posted a picture of perfect deviled eggs, despite describing my disdain for the arduous task to my readers. The message I write says “what a worthless endeavor!” while my image suggests the opposite. It would not have occurred to me to use a bad photo at the time I published the post, for it would ruin the demure, feminine esthetic.

To return to Figure 3, “Not-so-pleasant-pheasant,” is to return the image that is the least appetizing of all my images. I express my disappointment in my efforts to my readers, and ask the blogosphere for an alternative pheasant recipe to try. I believe I am open and transparent in my writing about the cooking process.

However, despite the ugliness of the finished dish, I still staged the overcooked pheasant on a clean, white plate. When I think back on this experience, I remember



taking countless photos, rearranging the pieces of pheasant to try to get the perfect angle. Despite my attempts to project a sense of authenticity, I still manipulate the final product. I was not completely transparent with my readers. The lesson to be learned here is that the food blog genre still requires artificiality, even when the blogger chronicles a disappointing experience. As I learned from following many popular food blogs, not many food bloggers tell about bad experiences in the kitchen. In this sense, I played into the gendered assumption that a woman's work in the kitchen must be perfect.

Perhaps no past blog post is more troubling for me as an enlightened feminist than Figure 4, “Practice, practice, practice.” Reflecting on the experience now, I find the writing rife with insecurities, anxieties and self-doubt. I write of being afraid I am going to disappoint the guests that I would host for a bridal shower. I describe my worth as a woman as being

completely defined the opinions of others. Additionally, I allowed these opinions to determine how effectively I achieved these feminine ideals.

I continue in this post to speak casually about the amount of anxiety I experience as a result of the shower. The passivity with which I treat my anxiety is alarming to me now, especially considering I find this same tone throughout my blog. Rather than challenge the anxiety I felt as a consequence of the unrealistic standards society has placed on women, I misappropriate the anxiety to my

novice cooking skills. I say, “I know my anxiety is triggered by egg bakes because they are one variable I can’t control Saturday morning.” Today, I understand my anxiety was triggered by circumstances far more complicated than a casserole; my anxiety was triggered in part by the pressures women feel to achieve unrealistic feminine ideals.

Posted on May 5, 2011



I'm pretty sure I'm suffering a mild case of early-onset strata anxiety.

All the signs are present: shortness of breath, heart palpitations and insomnia.

Saturday morning, 40 or so bridal shower attendees will be at my doorstep expecting brunch – and I'm so afraid I'm going to disappoint.



In another post, “Is it Saturday yet?” (Figure 12), I miss an opportunity to challenge patriarchal gender norms as the source of my anxiety. Here, as in the last example, I misappropriate my anxiety on the actual act of hosting. I now understand that the anxiety had more to do with the unrealistic standards I held myself to. Though the blog post does not contain any photos of food or mention of a recipe, I use the blog post to express my anxiety about an upcoming bridal shower that I am hosting for a friend. I write: “It’s Sunday evening, and suddenly I’m paralyzed with anxiety about next Saturday’s shower.” My fears and anxiety were real, and though I may not have fully realized it at the time, my food blog was

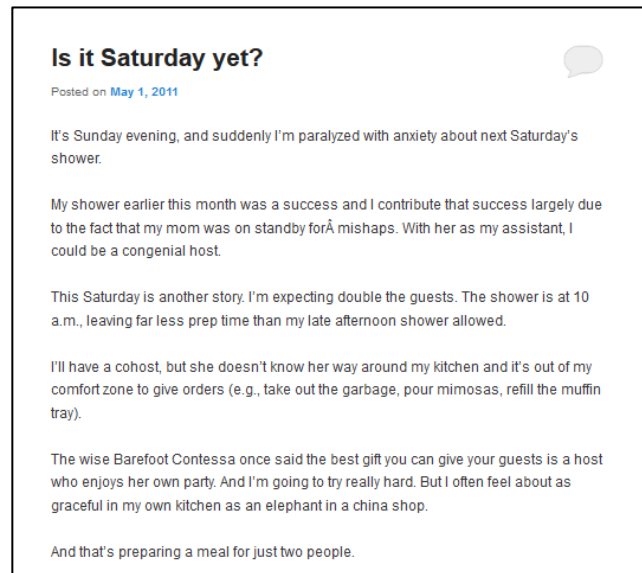


Figure 12. “Is it Saturday yet” *Yum*

an attempt for me to cope with my anxiety. However, rather than challenge the anxiety as a consequence of the patriarchal society we live in, I place the blame on myself.

Aside from the fact that I did not use the blogpost space to challenge societal expectations, I believe feminists would praise the fact that I’ a writing from the perspective of someone with an anxiety disorder, a voice that is often marginalized in the blogosphere. In this blog post, I see femininity and feminism coexisting: I can write freely about domestic topics while simultaneously exposing my struggles with anxiety. I believe a feminist reading of this blog post would also praise the intersectionality that is at play when a woman writes both from the perspective of being female and being female with an anxiety disorder.

Elsewhere in my blog, I have located places where my self-deprecating tone undermines my authority as a woman and as a writer. As an example, consider the “about me” section of my blog (figure 13). In this section, I find my writing to be apologetic and self-

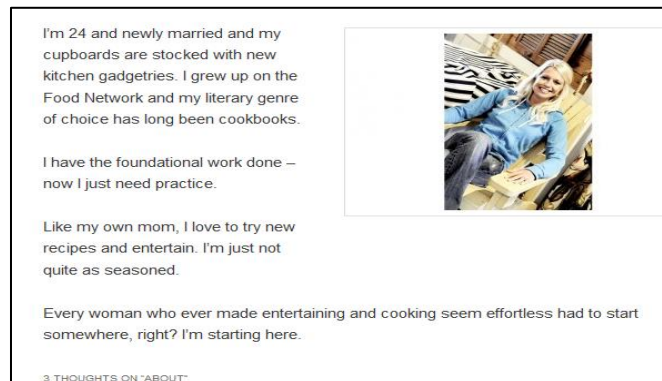


Figure 13. “About” *Yum*

deprecating; these are the traits society has come to associate with feminine gender expression. I begin this section by identifying myself as newly married, albeit somewhat insecure. As an example of my insecurities, I describe myself as “not quite as seasoned” in the kitchen in comparison with my own mother, and I describe myself culinary skills as “in need of practice.” In the last sentence of the section, I make a gendered assumption about women, and that is that women should make cooking and entertaining seem effortless.

To revisit this section was an opportunity for me to see how much I have grown as a woman, a feminist, and a writer. Today, my more feminist sensibilities allow me to realize that perfection projected by popular food blogs is not feasible. However, the shortsightedness of my earlier proclivities were a mirror of what I perceived from mainstream female food bloggers. To me, the lives and personas of other food bloggers I sought to emulate projected an aura of perfection.

### **Transparency and Honest Reflection in Food Blogs**

The food blogosphere is a supportive digital environment where I felt I could share my love for cooking with a wider audience. However, I believe the food blogosphere values

image and perfection over transparency and honest reflection. In the countless blogs I have followed, I have found I need to look to the text, rather than images, for authenticity. In certain posts, my blog was a place for honest reflection on my cooking endeavors in that I complain about arduous tasks like peeling eggshells. However, I believe the tone of other blog posts I read did not reflect this same sense of disdain or skepticism towards unrealistic feminine ideals. This lack of tension in food blogs may be at the root of why I thought feminism and femininity did not belong on the same blog.

As I now better understand gender expression as a continuum, I find myself far less likely to judge a food blog authored by a woman. As an example, consider the popular food blog *Iowa Girl Eats*. Kristin Porter, the author of the blog, posts about the busyness of her life with a husband and toddler. In her blog post

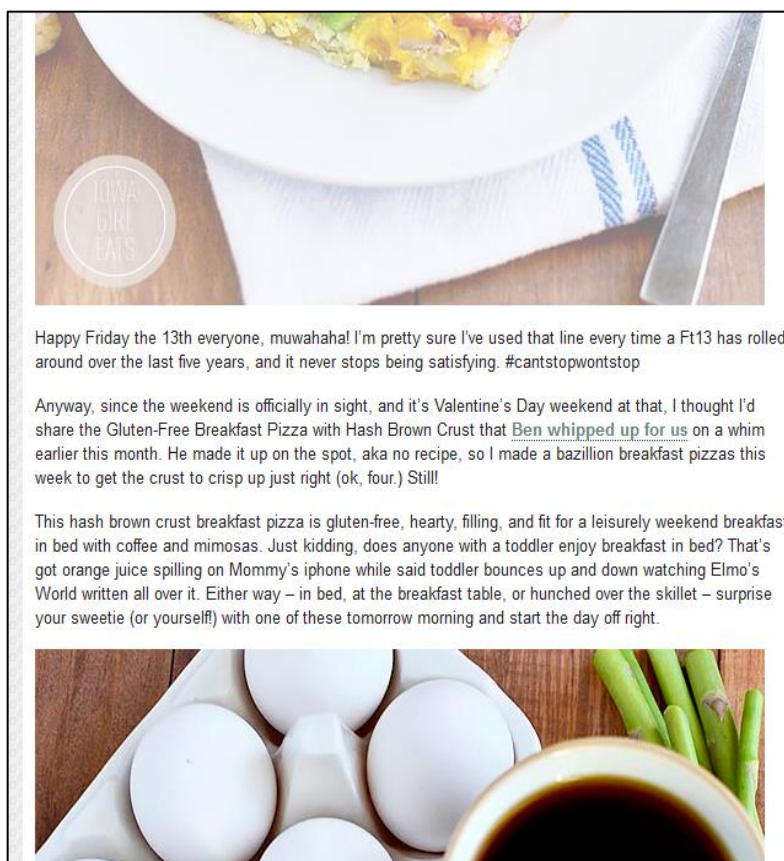


Figure 14. “Gluten-free breakfast pizza” *Iowa Girl Eats*

entitled, “Gluten-free breakfast pizza” (Figure 14). Kristin begins the post by explaining how her husband made her a breakfast pizza. She goes on to explain how she attempted four times

to recreate the dish to replicate what her husband had made. I find this interesting from a feminist perspective for two reasons: 1) Kristin describes her husband as cooking the original breakfast, thereby breaking with traditional gender roles, and 2) Kristin shares openly and honestly with her readers that she attempted the crust four times in order to get it right. Lastly, Kristin shares the realities of living with a toddler in that breakfast in bed is not feasible: “This hash brown crust breakfast is...fit for a leisurely breakfast in bed with coffee and mimosas. Just kidding, does anyone with a toddler enjoy breakfast in bed?” (Porter).

Another food blog that I believe offers its own brand of authenticity to its readers is *Pinch of Yum*. The author of this blog is a full-time blogger and former fourth grade teacher named Lindsay. Together with her husband Bjork, she writes, photographs, and promotes her blog. Her blog has the same dreamy, curated quality of many other food blogs I follow. Upon first glance, the blog’s glossy photos seem out-of-touch with the lived realities of many women (Figure 15). However, each month, Lindsay and her husband Bjork post the monthly income generated by their

food blog. As it turns out, the blog is considerably

lucrative: in February of

2015, the couple earned

\$26,254.58. I believe the fact

that the couple makes public

the income they earn from the blog

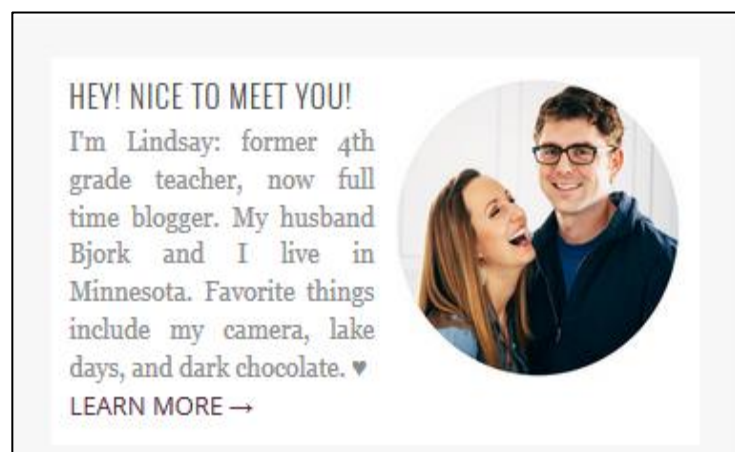


Figure 15. “Hey! Nice to meet you!” *Pinch of Yum*

gives readers perspective as to how and why the blog and its content is as perfect as it appears. Without this knowledge, I believe it is easy for women to unfairly compare themselves to bloggers who are able to generate a more sizeable income for their endeavors.

Transparency seems to be highly valued in today's blogosphere, and a hallmark example of this is *Real Simple's* WomenIRL Instagram account (Figure 16). This account champions the imperfect, unfiltered moments of the real lives of women, and encourages women to share their own photos of life's imperfect moments. As an example, consider Figure 16. This image stands in stark contrast to my own image of deviled eggs from 2011.

The WomenIRL post is all the more real because so it is a lived experience of so many women, yet it is images like Figure 16 that are not posted to food blogs and social media



Figure 16. WomenIRL

accounts. In posting images like that below, women are able to connect, express and validate themselves in an environment that is more inclusive and genuine.

The food blogosphere seemed to have limitless possibilities, yet why did I feel so constricted as to what I could write and how I could write it? As a 23-year-old, the food blogs I followed projected perfection: carefully curated images were accompanied by equally

enchanting commentary. The authors behind these blogs were oftentimes fresh-faced, happily married young women with adorable children and perfect homes. At the time I was furiously trying to keep up with my own blog, I did not have the foresight to look at these seemingly perfect blogs through a sociocultural and feminist lens. In retrospect, I could not identify the privilege of the women who wrote the food blogs I followed. I did not question the lack of diversity or lack of access in the authorship. I felt pressure to meet the expectations set the food blogs I admired, and these expectations meant that I felt constrained to fit what I thought was a cookie-cutter genre form. In my mind, my food blog must match the quality I saw in other blogs. I unfairly compared by own circumstances and blog to the blogs of women with more time and more resources than I had, and as a result, my confidence dwindled.

My original research question stemmed from my curiosity as a young woman with a food blog, on the precipice of feminism. I questioned whether I could be a feminist, while authoring a food blog that focused on domestic, feminine endeavors. In my experience through early adulthood, it seemed as though feminism and femininity were mutually exclusive. I do not think I am an outlier in identifying as both feminine and feminist, and I think countless domestic blogs authored by hundreds of strong, confident women are a testament to others like me who are both feminine and feminist.

Today, I know feminism and femininity can coexist. However, I could not help but feel as though it seemed as if the two were mutually exclusive in the food blogosphere. My identity as a feminist was complicated for me by the fact that I authored a food blog. As a food blogger, I occupied a domestic space. I felt constrained by the food blog genre because existing food blogs did not seem to challenge unrealistic feminine ideals and patriarchal gender norms. My blog was a space for me to express my interest in culinary arts and

entertaining, largely for the benefit of my husband and family. In hindsight, I wish I would have used my blog to challenge the tensions and anxieties I felt as a woman. Because of my participation in this space, I believe I could not fully embrace feminism. My early misconceptions about feminism and the construct of femininity led me to believe that in writing about feminine, domestic topics, I had lost the respect of feminist women. Today, I own up to the fact that my research question has more to do with a sense that it feels as if there is exists an incompatibility between feminism and femininity, as opposed to an actual incompatibility between the two.

I believe increasing instances of food blogs that are overtly both feminist and feminine might help to redraw boundaries and establish a genre that is more up-to-date and welcoming of more women's voices. I now understand that it is entirely acceptable for women to write about whatever topics they choose, as long as women continually challenge the status quo and use food blogs to express themselves in a meaningful way. With my own food blog, I am able to identify places in my writing where I begin to question unrealistic feminine ideals and patriarchal gender norms. However, my introspection stops short of a true feminist analysis. My new understanding of feminism affords me the ability to see blogging as an opportunity to explore tensions and anxieties that arise as a result of unrealistic feminine ideals and patriarchal gender norms. Until recently, I was self-conscious to write about domestic tasks like cooking, because society has devalued femininity. I understand more clearly today, feminism means I am able to write about whatever I want, so long as I continue to challenge the status quo of the food blogosphere.

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