

Identity, Ethos, and Community: Rhetorical Dimensions of Secular Mommy Blogs

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines secular mommy bloggers, a group of women who blog about the difficulties of being a nonbeliever parent in a predominantly religious society. In this study, I explore the rhetorical dimensions of four separate blogs by investigating how each mother builds identity within her personal blog and how her sense of identity enables her to construct individual ethos. Furthermore, I illustrate how the individual ethos of each blogger contributes to a group ethos representing the entire secular parenting community. Ultimately, I show how these mothers rhetorically set themselves apart from other nonbeliever/secular groups.

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## Introduction

Nonbelievers and secularists have traditionally been targets of stigmatization in the United States. According to a national survey conducted in 2003, “Americans named atheists as least likely to share their vision of America” (Edgell, Gerteis, Hartmann 212). This sentiment has not seemed to change much since then, as, according to a 2014 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, the American public predominantly views atheists or nonbelievers negatively (“How Americans Feel about Religious Groups”). For this project, I examine how one nonbeliever group, secular mommy bloggers, use language and develop ethos. Secular mommy bloggers are members of an online secular parenting community that provide advice and support for nonbeliever parents who raise their children without religion. Since nonbelievers can represent a highly stereotyped and vilified population, these secular mommy bloggers aim to bring secular issues to the forefront of public discussion and combat these negative perceptions through discourse in the blogosphere. But these secular mommy bloggers enter the conversation as a subjugated minority. According to the 2008 Religious Identification Survey, 72 percent of nonbelievers are white, and 60 percent are men. Therefore, women do not have as significant of a voice within the nonbeliever population (Brown).

For this project, I take a multifaceted approach by not only analyzing secular discourse in general, but also examining how gender and genre affect the ethos of a particular secular group. Therefore, to conduct my analysis, I examine the following research questions: 1) How do secular mommy bloggers create identity and build ethos within a traditionally male dominated dialogue? 2) In what ways does blogging as their chosen communication medium affect how they use language to create identity and build ethos? 3) And, furthermore, in what ways do these

identities impact rhetorical understandings of blogging communities and nonbeliever discourse more generally?

### **Why Nonbelievers?**

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, nearly six percent of the U.S. population (about 13 million people) identify as atheists or agnostics, while 14 percent of the public (nearly 33 million people) say they have no particular religious affiliation. And “in the last five years alone, the [religiously] unaffiliated have increased from just over 15 percent to just under 20 percent of all U.S. adults” (qtd. in McClure 3). But despite this population increase, nonbelievers still face immense criticism from the broader American population. For example, a study performed by Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann at the University of Minnesota found that atheists are “the new outsiders” and the least trusted group in America (Miller). Amy Irene McClure points to this study in her dissertation on atheist and pagan parents in the Bible Belt. She says that Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann “found that atheists feel stigmatized” because they are often labelled militant, aggressive, or combative (McClure 19). In order to cope with this stigmatization, some nonbelievers will reject labels like “atheist” or “agnostic” or refrain from entering into religious conversations, thereby choosing to not identify with certain populations of people despite their commonalities (McClure 34). Since nonbelievers are such a highly stigmatized and stereotyped population who, therefore, sometimes feel the need to conceal or downplay this part of their identity, I think it is imperative to begin a conversation about how nonbelievers assert identity through language in an effort to establish themselves within society.

## **Why Secular Mommy Bloggers?**

As stated previously, secular mommy bloggers are a minority within this stigmatized population, since women only make up 40 percent of nonbelievers in the United States. In fact, some prominent atheist public figures admit that they have a diversity problem. For example, national affiliate director for American Atheists Blair Scott said, “Anytime you go to an atheist meeting, it tends to be predominantly male and white. We know that. We go out of our way to encourage participation by females and minorities. The problem is getting those people out in the first place” (qtd. in Brown).

Because women are underrepresented in the nonbeliever population, they do not have as much of a voice in movements meant to raise awareness and promote the interests of nonbelievers. Therefore, I use this study to show that there are indeed female voices in the nonbeliever population and that other viewpoints besides those that dominate popular media do exist and do matter. I look to the secular mommy bloggers in particular because, as mothers, they potentially face more discrimination than other nonbelievers. And based on traditional gender roles that I will highlight in the Literature Review, they are held responsible for their children’s sense of morality. Furthermore, when they write about atheism or agnosticism, they do so not just through the lens of a nonbeliever but also a parent. Their experiences as mothers directly influence the way they think and talk about their lack of belief. Additionally, they address their posts to other parents, specifically other nonbeliever parents, and religious parents trying to understand another perspective. Therefore, I argue that their identities as mothers play a central role in how they frame their discussions and develop the ethos of their blogs.

Additionally, “mommy blogging” has garnered attention in academia, with studies focusing on identity, community, stereotypes, and commodification (Crosby, Daniels, Lawson,

Lee, Lopez, Morrison). My research builds on these studies by focusing on a specific group of mothers and how they negotiate their identities and their roles both as mothers and nonbelievers. Furthermore, blogs provide unique, dynamic spaces for the study of language since bloggers have direct access to their audience through commenting features. As I will show, this access to audience feedback, and the ability to converse with the audience, shapes how secular mommy bloggers present their identities and develop ethos.

### **The Blogs**

In this study, I analyze four secular mommy blogs: *Agnostic Mom* by Noell Hyman, *Natural Wonderers* (previously called *Relax, It's Just God*) by Wendy Thomas Russell, *Kids Without Religion* by Deborah Mitchell, and *The Secular Parent* by Be-Asia McKerracher. I originally chose these particular blogs because they had significantly more comments than other secular parenting blogs, and all of the authors had published other work, such as articles and books, on secular parenting. For example Mitchell wrote a CNN iReport titled “Why I Raise My Children Without God.” This iReport, published in 2013, received more comments than any other iReport posted that year.

Since their blogs received considerable traffic, and they produced material for multiple platforms, I considered them reputable and prominent members of the secular parenting community. But as I began reading their posts, I also discovered that they had much more in common beyond publications and traffic. For instance, three out of the four mothers wrote posts addressing “coming out” as a nonbeliever, a topic I explore further in the third chapter (Hyman, “Coming Out of the Closet;” Mitchell, “Coming Out;” Russell, “Must We ‘Come Out’”). Additionally, all four mothers expressed feeling some sort of guilt for rejecting religion or in how they’ve handled religion with their children (Hyman, “Coming Out of the Closet;” Mitchell,

“Guilty;” Russell, “Honesty, Schmonesty;” McKerracher, “Religion’s a Joke”). After seeing these common topics and themes addressed by all four mothers, I realized that these blogs, while interesting and compelling on their own, convey more than personal experience. As these mothers detail their individual realities, they contribute to a shared consciousness between all mothers in similar positions. Therefore, while it is important to examine each blog individually in order to highlight the unique personalities of each blogger, and the personal nuances in their experiences and opinions, ultimately, I show how these personal experiences form a community of like-minded individuals and how the individual ethos of each blogger contributes to the group ethos of the community.

### **Dominant Voices in the Secular Conversation**

A group called the “new atheists” are perhaps the most dominant group within the nonbeliever population. They are public intellectuals who think “religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises” (Hooper). Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, the most well-known new atheists, have a collective nickname, “The Four Horsemen,” which references the coming of the apocalypse in the Book of Revelations. This nickname originated from a 2007 debate involving all four men (Gribben). These new atheists tout impressive credentials: Dawkins has a PhD in Biology and is an emeritus fellow at New College, Oxford and was the “University of Oxford’s Professor for Public Understanding of Science” from 1995 through 2008; Sam Harris has a PhD in Cognitive Neuroscience; Daniel Dennett has a PhD in Philosophy and is a professor at Tufts University; and finally, Christopher Hitchens has a degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Balliol College, Oxford. Their most prominent books, *The God Delusion* (Dawkins), *The End of Faith* (Harris), *Breaking the Spell:*

*Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Dennett), and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Hitchens) were all published in a three-year span between 2003 and 2007, marking the rise and origin of the new atheism movement. These authors vitriolically denounce religion and use science in attempts to disprove God and all religious belief. They also represent the majority of nonbelievers: white males. When I discuss the secular mommy bloggers in relation to the “dominant” or “mainstream” voices in the nonbeliever population, I am referring to the new atheists.

While the new atheists may have some of the “loudest” voices of all nonbelievers, they certainly do not represent the entire nonbeliever population. But since the new atheists receive so much publicity in comparison to other voices, I speculate that many of the stereotypes associated with nonbelievers, at least in part, stem from the combative tone that new atheists exude in their writings. Therefore, I think it is important to draw attention to another distinct group, like the secular mommy bloggers, to highlight the differences within the nonbeliever population.

### **Overview of Chapters**

In my first chapter, I include a literature review with pertinent information to my research. I first discuss the relationship between religion and the ideology surrounding motherhood. I argue that religion has played a significant part in naturalizing motherhood and in setting impossible expectations for modern mothers. Ultimately, I use this information to demonstrate how motherly expectations affect the secular mommy blogger’s sense of identity and how they present their identity to their audience. Next, I examine women’s role in the blogosphere and how the Internet affects women’s communication, both positively and negatively. Within that section, I also briefly include some characteristics of the “mommy blogging” genre since my subjects of analysis fit into that category.

In the second chapter, I provide an overview of my methodology, including my rationale; my theoretical framework, where I connect theories of identity and ethos; descriptions of each blog in my dataset; and my coding and analytical categories.

Finally, in the third chapter, I present my analysis through the themes I saw emerging in the blogs and include a discussion of those themes and their implications for blogging and communities and nonbeliever discourse. First, I demonstrate how the secular mommy bloggers establish identity throughout their blogs. Then, based on those identities, I show how the secular mommy bloggers develop their individual ethos, which, I argue, ultimately contributes to a shared consciousness or group ethos of the entire blogging community.

Additionally, throughout this study, I use the terms nonbeliever and secular interchangeably to refer to any person who does not believe in any kind of God or religion. I choose to use these terms because they are more inclusive than labels like atheist or agnostic. The terms nonbeliever and secular include both atheists and agnostics. Furthermore, some of the secular mommy bloggers identify as agnostic while others identify as atheist. Therefore, to avoid confusion, I simply refer to them as secular or nonbelievers.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

### Motherhood Ideology and Religion

Since a major focus of my study is how the secular mommy bloggers' role as mothers contributes to their ethos, I begin by looking at expectations of motherhood and how religion contributes to an institutionalized motherhood ideology. In *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the late Adrienne Rich presents an early conception of motherhood as a construct by detailing "the distinction between motherhood as experience and as institution" (McCabe 78). Rich highlights religion, especially Christianity, as one influence on the institutionalization of motherhood. She specifically references Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden and the Virgin Mary's sacrifice as the mother of Jesus and highlights misogynistic and patriarchal undertones behind Eve and Mary's roles within the Bible. Mary Daly, another early radical feminist thinker, also critiques the portrayal of female figures in the Bible in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. I use Rich and Daly's interpretations of motherhood and religion to challenge the construct of the "natural," "sacrificial" mother and provide historical context for the current ideals surrounding motherhood.

Motherhood, I argue, has become somewhat of a modern-day religion, with its own forms of dogma and indoctrination. In her book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, Judith Warner details motherhood's divine transformation: "From the late eighteenth century, when evangelical Protestantism and Enlightenment rationalism combined to invest motherhood with world-making purposes, to today, when the decision to breastfeed or not carries heaven-or-hell urgency, motherhood has been made into a 'production' of higher consequences" (64). As this statement suggests, "Woman's status as childbearer has been made into a major fact of life" (Rich 11), and "In the last century and a half, the idea of full-time, exclusive motherhood [has

taken] root, and the ‘home’ becomes a religious obsession” (Rich 44). In this chapter, I focus on this “religious obsession” and how religion, specifically Christianity, has contributed to the traditional definition and expectations of motherhood. To establish context for my argument, I present a quotation from the American Tract Society, an evangelical group that publishes and circulates Christian literature:

“The world’s redeeming influence, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, must come from a mother’s lips. She who was first in the transgression, must yet be the principal earthly instrument in the restoration. It is maternal influence, after all, which must be the great agent in the hands of God, in bringing back our guilty race to duty and happiness.” (qtd. in Rich 44)

When the American Tract Society cites the “first in transgression,” they refer to Eve, who they deem as the “mother” of sin. Eve’s story is used to prove “woman’s inferior place in the universe...Not only did she have her origin in man; she was also the cause of his downfall and all his miseries” (Daly 46). Therefore, because of Eve’s curse upon the world, mothers must shepherd society in order to pay for the guilt and evil associated with their sex. Mothers must “carry the burden of male salvation” (Rich 45) and accept that “pain in childbirth is punishment from God” (Rich 128). In fact, women were forced to suffer because “the cries of women in childbirth were for the glory of God the father” (Rich 168). Throughout a majority of the nineteenth century, “the curse laid on Eve in Genesis was taken literally” and attempting to alleviate pain in any way “seemed to threaten the foundations of patriarchal religion” (Rich 128). The predominant line of thinking held that if women avoided the suffering of childbirth, it would essentially negate the curse of original sin, which originates from Eve’s transgression. Without the proof of this undying curse, these patriarchal ideals associated with God and Christianity fade into obsolescence.

But, in this case, the patriarchy is not so easy to obstruct because it “takes on cosmic proportions since the male’s viewpoint is metamorphosed into God’s viewpoint” (Daly 47).

Therefore, “the males’ judgment having been [transformed] into God’s judgment, it becomes the religious duty of women to accept the burden of guilt, seeing the self with male chauvinist eyes” (Daly 49). Hence, even with the advent of modern medicine and the acceptance of the epidural, pain during childbirth is still emphasized and represents the beginning of a motherly narrative steeped in a burden and suffering that most consider inevitable. Today, this burden translates into expectations that dictate motherhood as the ultimate goal for all women and as an all-encompassing role that requires sacrifice and unconditional love, both qualities exemplified in the Christian God, His son Jesus Christ, and in the Virgin Mary. Rich outlines how these expectations of sacrifice and unconditional love create assumptions about the “natural” mother: “a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs” (22-23). And, since the mother upholds the ideals of patriarchy by exemplifying “religion, social conscience, and nationalism,” she is then responsible for “reviv[ing] and renew[ing] all other institutions” (Rich 45).

But while Rich and Daly rejected the idea of the “natural” mother, other feminist thinkers in the 1970s sought “to revalue the traditional characteristics and sentiments associated with mothering (nurturance, care, peace, love) either as innate to women or as cultural predispositions to be cultivated and praised” (Ragoné and Twine 263). For instance, Alice Rossi, a founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), published an article in the 1970s entitled “A Biosocial Perspective on Parenting” where she argues that “it is infinitely preferable for the mother rather than the father to invest time in raising a child” because women are instinctually maternal. This line of thinking caused a “powerful swing toward celebrating the sublime state of motherhood as women’s true destiny, the condition for their happiness” (Badinter). These perceived “universal” traits effectively naturalize motherhood, making “any

deviation from that identity uniquely abhorrent” (Ragoné and Twine 266). While Rossi does not draw from Biblical notions of motherhood, her interpretations seem to coincide with the idea of the “sacrificial” mother, which has become a ubiquitous construct in contemporary culture. For example, a Mother’s Day ad made by cardstore.com that recently went viral purports to pay tribute to the hard work of the all-encompassing mother. The ad is even called “World’s Toughest Job.” It begins by showing fake Skype interviews for a job vaguely titled “Director of Operations.” The interviewer describes it as “probably the most important job,” and he then lists the qualifications and duties. He says the interviewees will “constantly [be] on [their] feet,” that “there are no breaks available,” that “it’s basically 24 hours a day and seven days a week,” and “if the [interviewee] had a life, [they’d] ask [them] to give that life up.” After the interviewees complain about how this job is “too much” and “inhumane,” the interviewer reveals that the job is actually one that is performed by billions of mothers every day (“The World’s Toughest Job”).

Although advertisers created this ad to get people’s attention and evoke appreciation for mothers (and, of course, to sell cards and make money), they have also unknowingly contributed to a suppressive discourse that puts pressure on mothers to embody this unrealistic, all-encompassing role that also confines them to one single interpretation of motherhood. Therefore, if a mother does not live up to those expectations, or society does not think she is properly fulfilling her “sacred” duties of both childrearing and advancing society, she may start to feel a sense of failure or a sense of alienation not only from other mothers, but also from the community as a whole.

These unrealistic expectations contribute to a dichotomy where women are defined as either “good” or “bad” mothers, which has created a tension between mothers who come from different backgrounds or hold different beliefs. Deirdre D. Johnson and Debra H. Swanson refer

to this tension as “mother wars” (500). They investigate these mother wars in term of working moms versus stay-at-home moms. Johnson and Swanson found that both stay-at-home moms and working moms tend to define a “good” mother “through the construction of definitional boundaries that exclude mothers different from themselves” (498). Therefore, stay-at-home mothers defined the ideal mother as “self-sacrificing” and never putting their own needs before their children (including a career), while working mothers “believed that a happy mother makes a happy child” and that a happy mother has activities and an identity separate from motherhood (498). Johnson and Swanson speculate that these mothers form these conceptions of motherhood as a response to societal expectations and pressures. For instance, mothers often receive double bind messages from media and society that, on the one hand, promote certain ideals surrounding motherhood, but, on the other hand, condemn mothers for achieving those ideals. For instance, “at-home mothers were...presented as naturally and innately prepared for the tasks of motherhood, yet in need of continual expert advice” from doctors, handbooks, magazines, etc (Johnson and Swanson 498). Similarly, working mothers are sometimes lauded as “supermoms” and praised for being role models for their children, yet, at the same time, they are stereotyped as “frazzled” and too preoccupied with work to pay enough attention to their children (Johnson and Swanson 497). Based on these conflicting vantage points, it’s no wonder that mothers become defensive and seek to align with “those...whom they share a context” (Johnson and Swanson 499).

Similarly, in order to fend off negativity and prevent ostracization, nonreligious mothers, like the secular mommy bloggers in this study, may “use various stigma management strategies” that allow them to both defend their image and conform to traditional motherhood ideals (McClure 30). McClure describes one type of management strategy in her dissertation: defensive

othering. Defensive othering “involves accepting the dominant group’s stereotyping and stigmatizing, but only as applied to other members of the minority.” This strategy may help individuals gain acceptance and combat criticism from the majority, “but it leaves stereotypes unchallenged” (McClure 30). Essentially, those who practice defensive othering distance themselves from stereotypes by denying their involvement in a stigmatized social group and by condemning those who do openly associate with that group. So, in this case, those who identify as nonreligious may disassociate themselves from the “atheist” label because atheists are often stereotyped as “militant,” as “being hostile towards religion,” and as “followers fanatically [worshipping] science” (McClure 33-34). McClure describes these complicit nonbelievers as “coexistor atheists” and notes that they are often parents who “present themselves not as anti-religion but as wanting no less respect than the religious are afforded” (34). They do not broadcast their beliefs or engage in any type of nonbeliever activism. But this distancing from activism creates a paradox in that “they unintentionally reproduce the stigma they are attempting to avoid by defining ‘militant’ atheists’ as real and problematic” (34). Thus, when parents do want to be open about their lack of belief, they are automatically labelled as militant, aggressive, or combative.

Thus, not only religious people criticize unabashedly nonbeliever parents. In fact, nonbeliever parents who try to speak out about their beliefs are “undermined at every turn by the enemy within—members of their group who participate in justifying and reinforcing the prejudice and discrimination they seek to end” (McClure 31). For example, McClure interviewed parents who were a part of a secular parenting group. In her dissertation, she refers to Allison, one mother in the group who she describes as a “central member” because she regularly attends meetings and organizes activities and functions. But when she discusses atheist parents, she

describes them as “angry and obsessed.” She even previously referred to her husband as “angry atheist guy” (McClure 36). Although Allison does not believe in God, just like the other parents in her group, she still tries to distance herself from atheism by vocally denouncing those who openly identify as atheist, in turn, ironically perpetuating the negative stereotypes associated with her own beliefs. Additionally, McClure observed this same group as they were sitting in a circle and introducing themselves. One father “announce[d] with gusto and anger, ‘I’m Ben. I’m here because I can’t stand the stupid fundie bullshit here in the Bible Belt. It’s everywhere and it’s absurd!’” She says that “a couple parents nod[ded] in approval but most seem[ed] uncomfortable.” One couple “immediately [left] to tend to their child,” and “a few parents shift[ed] their weight nervously or half-smile[d]...No one respond[ed] to Ben” (McClure 38). In this situation, the other parents did not openly chastise Ben for his statement, but by choosing to ignore him and not respond to his introduction, or to even physically move away from him, they discreetly showed their disapproval and thus dissociated themselves from his blunt opinion. Undoubtedly, McClure found that these coexistor parents defined “good atheist parents as passive or unaggressive” and believed they should refrain from showcasing their beliefs because “atheists who publicly avow...atheism...[are] too pushy” (40). But refraining from being “pushy” may not be enough to avoid derision from believers. A local news story about the secular parenting group was published online, and even though the journalist who wrote the piece simply described them as a group of parents “looking for community,” commenters still accused them of extremism (McClure 36). Thus, this one example shows that it really does not matter what “type” of atheist or nonbeliever these parents personify. It is the attitude towards atheists and nonbelievers as a whole that ostracizes them, and by accusing unapologetic atheists of being “pushy,” coexistor atheist parents only contribute to their own marginalization.

Interestingly, it is mostly the mothers in the group who vocally denounce these “pushy” atheists, possibly in an attempt to reconcile their own unpopular beliefs with their desire to conform within a motherly discourse that does not account for nonbelievers, and to present themselves as the “good” mother that society values. And a part of conforming to this conventional motherly identity involves a mother instilling compassion and morality into her children. But, first, morality and compassion must be instilled in the mother. That’s where religion comes in. If she does not have religious guidance, then what will be her and her children’s moral compass? Outsiders may view her lack of religion as a lack of integrity and principles. Thus, even though these mothers may not believe in a deity, to show that they do indeed follow a set of moral principles, they might disassociate themselves from any kind of label that deems them as staunchly nonreligious. Instead, they may claim to be “spiritual.” In her study, McClure found that “Seeking secular spirituality was a gendered phenomenon. Only mothers mentioned a desire for mystery or spirituality” while none of “the atheist fathers interviewed...mentioned a need for spirituality in their lives” (43). McClure exemplifies this finding with two parents, Jessica and Rick. Jessica said that she tended to be “a little more open-ended and spiritual” while Rick “would be comfortable saying he’s atheist” (43). While McClure had a limited number of interviewees for her study, these findings are still telling and illustrate how societal pressures affect women’s identity as mothers. Jessica and these other mothers who claimed spirituality rather than religious affiliation could be saving face and preventing backlash and judgment from those who deem religion as important and as the only means of developing a sense of morality.

The mothers within the secular parenting blogging community, on the other hand, have chosen to openly broadcast their convictions despite the immense ideological pressure. Unlike

the prominent male atheist authors, these mothers face subjugation that goes beyond their lack of belief in God, so their willingness to speak out is significant. But, as stated previously, these secular mommy bloggers use their identities as mothers to build their ethos, so this ideology behind modern-day conceptions of motherhood will affect how they see themselves as mothers and, in turn, affect how they talk about nonbelief and how they communicate with their audience. Next, since these mothers use blogging as their medium of discourse, I present research on feminist conceptions of the blogosphere and how mommy bloggers in particular fit into this virtual space.

### **Motherhood, Community, and the Blogosphere**

Approximately 36.2 million women participate in the blogosphere each week, with 15.1 million writing blogs posts at least once a week and 21.1 million reading and commenting on those posts (Daniels 29). In 2004, *Time Magazine* published a piece on women's activity in the blogosphere, which reported that women make up a majority of bloggers in the United States. They also referred to blogging as a "'21<sup>st</sup> century room of one's own,' evoking Virginia Woolf's famous requirement for feminist consciousness" (qtd in Daniels 30). Proponents of blogging praise it as a way for women to form identity and community within their own "space," while critics argue that the same sexist, elitist structures and attitudes that plague women in the "real world" carry over into the virtual spaces of the Internet (Gurak).

One group of women who have risen to prominence within the blogosphere are "mommy bloggers." One of the first women to identify as a mommy blogger was Melinda Roberts who began TheMommyBlog.com in 2002. Although this blog no longer exists (Instead, when one types "TheMommyBlog.com" into a browser, a personal website advertising Roberts design and writing services appears.), in her "About" section, she references her status as the "one of the

original mom” bloggers (Roberts). The term “mommy blog” creates tension because, to some bloggers, it carries a condescending tone that “conjures up images of doting apron-clad sycophants smilingly paying homage to their tiny sovereigns” (qtd. in Lee 13), but, to other bloggers, “It identifies a very powerful and vocal demographic...Moms committed to community, both virtual and ‘real-life’” (qtd. in Lee 12). Thus, some women openly accept and identify with the term, while others consider it demeaning. Similarly, the proposed definitions of mommy blogging seem to be at odds with each other. For instance, Scarborough Research defines mommy bloggers as “women who have at least one child in their household and read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days” (Scarborough Research). But another definition claims that mommy bloggers are “women whose blog content is predominantly about her family” (Lee 5). The first definition is somewhat problematic because it automatically labels all mothers who blog as “mommy bloggers,” even if they don’t ever discuss their children or their family life on their blogs or on other’s blogs, and also implies that women don’t have any sense of identity apart from motherhood. Additionally, the second definition does not necessarily account for any variation in topic or theme within mommy blogs. But while the themes and topics within these women’s posts do often vary, mommy blogging has become its own distinct culture which has “developed its own normative practices around content, writing style, and degree and kind of interaction among participants” (Morrison 39). In this section, I argue that blogging can potentially help these women gain a sense of community, construct identity, and resist and counter dominant discourses that may stifle these mothers’ voices.

First, proponents commend blogging as a way to reach out to a broad audience and to create a sense of community between users. Professional bloggers in particular see blogging as a way to reach people who would not generally read their work. In “Reflections on Feminism,

Blogging, and the Historical Profession,” Rachel Leow summarizes a roundtable discussion by female academic bloggers. She recounts how one blogger in particular, Jennifer Ho, views blogging “as a way of engaging with and being held responsible to ‘a wider public beyond the ivory towers of academia’” (qtd in Leow 236). This sentiment could apply to women in any profession, and even to personal bloggers who want to reach women with similar experiences and viewpoints. In this way, these bloggers begin to develop a sense of community based on common interests. Similarly, in “Blogging Solo: New Media, ‘Old’ Politics,” Anthea Taylor gauges the potential for the blogosphere “to function as a public, or counterpublic” (90). But Taylor recognizes the heterogeneous nature of blogging communities, so instead of referring to blogs as a “singular public,” she uses Gillian Young’s term “mini-public spheres” to describe either individual blogs or groups of blogs that invite like-minded people from any location to join and participate in the community (90). These mini-public spheres form the many subcultures within women’s blogging, like mommy bloggers, allowing them to find a community that suits their needs and interests (Daniels 29).

Blogs are conducive to community formation because their participatory capabilities allow people to connect. As a form of “computer mediated communication (CMC)” blogs promote interaction through commenting and feedback functions that foster a collective dialogue. (Stavrositu and Sundar 2782). While commenting is the simplest way to participate in a conversation, sometimes bloggers will share their space and invite “guest bloggers” to compose a post. So, some women, then, have multiple ways that they can contribute to a blogging community, and “because of their ongoing conversation with other bloggers, and into which readers themselves can intervene, blogs can be seen as having a ‘collective and intersubjective authorship’” that relies on a number of voices to create a narrative (Taylor 93). This

collaborative, participatory nature has a certain energy to it that is attractive for women who need some kind of outlet from the emotional struggles they may face in their offline lives.

But critics slam this kind of participation as merely a way to develop “social currency,” to attract readers and build an online reputation. But often this social currency model does not suffice within some women’s blogging communities because participants in those communities are not looking to enhance their status or reputation; rather, they are looking for “friendship, connection, support, mutuality” (Burns 336). Therefore, “Burns suggests ‘energy exchange’ as an alternative term to ‘social currency’” because ‘energy exchange’ implies that relationship-building in a blogging community takes effort and dedication (Jack 336). Thus, to be a part of this “energy exchange” is to be “present” within the blogging community and participate. And, according to Adriana Braga, the only way to participate is to write: “Being in a blog environment is to write. To not write means invisibility. To register a comment means to be there, and interaction only occurs as participants ‘are there’ in written words” (Braga). And when many women write and participate in this energy exchange, multiple voices with differing experiences and viewpoints enrich the community. These interactions contribute to a shared consciousness among community members, which drives the formation of a community and a group ethos, a concept that I explore with the secular mommy bloggers in this study.

Rhetorical participation in an online community can be particularly helpful for women who would not normally get a voice within their “real-life” communities. Scholars have pointed to the advantages that blogs can provide for women who are marginalized in their physical communities (Jack, Leow, Stavrositu and Sundar). These women can use blogging to discuss issues with “like-minded individuals” (Jack 340) and to develop and proclaim their own voice, giving them a sense of “psychological empowerment” (Stavrositu and Sundar 2782). Thus,

blogging can be “a tremendous tool for fighting geographic and intellectual isolation” for women who do not have material contact with those who understand their experiences (Leow 236). For example, secular mothers who live in predominantly religious communities or who are surrounded by religious family members may feel alone in their day-to-day material existence, but they can connect and communicate with like-minded mothers through the secular parenting blogging community.

Because of the lack of formal rules within blogging communities, blogs also can enable women to more freely develop their voice and express their opinions. While there is still some sort of social control in terms of commenting (for instance, Deborah Mitchell, one of the secular mommy bloggers in this study, will block disrespectful commenters), “The absence of formal regulation—like laws for broadcasting—makes the production of contacts and cultural representations in blogs to be self-regulated via interactional constraints” (Braga). But despite this absence of formal rules, women’s blogs tend to resist agonistic communication and use alternative rhetorical forms in order to foster a safe space for conversation. For instance, “One of these [forms of communication] is invitational rhetoric,...’an invitation to understanding—to enter another’s world to better understand an issue and the individual who holds a particular perspective on it” (qtd in Jack 338). This type of communication promotes a sense of belonging in a community because participants are more likely to be open and honest about their experiences when they are confronted with understanding rather than animosity.

But, as critics have pointed out, although women’s online communities may seem more welcoming than others, they are still prone to the same issues that all online communities present. For example, while these “supporting styles of posting” mentioned above do promote respect and understanding, they also often focus on generating agreement, which can be

problematic, “for it erects invisible boundaries based on differences...[and] can inadvertently create inclusions and exclusions (Rybas 277). In other words, this push to encourage an accepting, agreeable environment could end up silencing some women who feel the need to speak in a more agonistic tone to fully express their thoughts and experiences.

This critique is pertinent because the blogosphere is not just a place to make connections; it’s also a space where women have the potential to develop or express their identities in ways that may not be possible in their offline lives. Through blogging, women can “carve out [their] own amount of space,” thereby forming their identities on their own terms. Scholars like Taylor and Jack equate this online identity formation to consciousness-raising and identity politics, two important tenets of second-wave feminism that value personal storytelling as an emancipatory activity (Jack 336, Taylor 80). In fact, women do tend to dominate the genre of personal blogs and make use of the personal component of blogs more than men (Angelone 61). And these blogs potentially provide a platform for women to construct their identity through multiple outlets. For example, many blogs have “About” pages, which give bloggers a space to introduce themselves and provide context for what they post. In fact, “the simple act of defining oneself” can be a resistant act because it allows women to take control of their identities, and “About” pages are one way for women to access that control (81). But identity formation is not confined to the “About” page. Women contribute to their online identity every time they write, whether it be in their own blog post or in the comments section of another blog. Furthermore, feminist blogosphere scholars, like Adriana Braga, find that women tend to utilize distinct language tactics to construct their virtual personas. Braga demonstrates this using Erving Goffman’s two regions of conversation: backstage and front. According to Goffman, when people work from the front region, they are polite and want to present a polished version of themselves. Conversely,

backstage conversation is less polished and often includes criticism and complaining. Although Goffman originally used these terms for face-to-face interactions, Braga argues that they can also apply to online communication. She claims that, due to the relative anonymity that the Internet affords, bloggers typically enact backstage conversation, which is more informal and closer to spoken language (218). In this sense, bloggers may be more comfortable presenting a more “authentic” version of themselves, which can be empowering.

But these attempts at identity formation are often misunderstood and devalued through criticism by male-dominated online discourses. Indeed, personal blogs, which tend to be written by women, do not gain as much media attention as the male-dominated genre of filter blogs, political blogs that primarily reference and link to other pieces of information online (Miller and Shepherd 6). Personal blogs are often stereotyped as superficial and meaningless because they tend to “lean toward ‘everyday’ issues and ‘traditionally feminine’ topics, [like] cooking, knitting, or motherhood rather than more overt political topics.” But women’s perspectives have “been muted and misinterpreted throughout history” and are constantly compared to more masculine frameworks. Even if these women’s personal writings are politically relevant, like many of the issues brought up in the secular parenting blogging community, they do not get the same attention because they do not conform to the narrow definition of politics that is favored by the phallogocentric political genre (Jack 329, 335). In popular media, women bloggers are either ignored or described using a condescending tone that decidedly marks women’s blogs as inferior to men’s blogs. For example, in 2005 *CNN* ran a report on blogging that referred to men and women bloggers as “pundits and knitters,” respectively. These labels suggest that women blog only about domestic topics that, unlike their masculine counterparts, have no influence in the public sphere. Similarly, two *New York Times* articles about women’s blogging appeared in the

“Fashion & Style” section rather than more “serious” sections like “Politics,” or even “News,” which “has been interpreted by many feminist bloggers as evidence of the trivialization of women’s blogging” (Daniels 32).

But even worse than the mainstream media trivializing women’s blogging are those who try to silence it completely. In “Cyberfeminist Movement for Space Online,” Yeon Ju Oh addresses the invisible censorship from “cyber terrorists” that women’s online communities often face (256). Cyber terrorists attempt to regulate women’s voices through “trolling” (intentional antagonism) and harassment, either in a blog’s comments section, or by creating their own sites specifically targeted at these women. These antagonizers will post or send violent threats to women, or they will find and publish their contact information and invite others to join them in the harassment. A current example is the online harassment of Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic, created Feminist Frequency, a video series and non-profit organization “that explores the representations of women in pop culture narratives” (Sarkeesian). She received death and rape threats after she created a Kickstarter to fund her video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, which calls attention to the sexist portrayal of women in video games. These threats, which are not uncommon for women with a prominent online presence, were an attempt to silence Sarkeesian and prevent her from expressing her opinions. As women who openly present their opinions online, secular mommy bloggers also face similar forms of abuse and censorship. For example, Deborah Mitchell, the author of *Kids Without Religion*, garnered intense negativity after she wrote a CNN iReport entitled “Why I Raise My Children Without God.” While she did not receive death threats, her post was repeatedly flagged as inappropriate<sup>1</sup>, and CNN had to write a disclaimer stating that the post did not violate its

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<sup>1</sup> Users can click a button labeled “this is inappropriate” if they see something that they think violates CNN’s “Community Guidelines”

“Community Guidelines” and insist people stop flagging it. Furthermore, the post received many unsavory comments, such as condemning her and her children to “eternal damnation” and calling her a “bad” mother. Both the flagging and the negative comments are an attempt to silence Mitchell and other mothers like her. Furthermore, *CNN* is a well-traveled site, so these negative comments are seen by many and serve as examples to other female bloggers; yet the secular mommy bloggers continue to write anyways, despite the risks.

Thus, secular mothers and all other women can utilize the blogosphere as a tool to resist dominant ideologies that infuse the online and offline worlds. Through blogging, women can reject the status quo and, instead, “talk back...to the dominant culture” and inscribe their own narratives based on their experiences both online and offline (Leow 239). The convergence of online and offline realities creates an opportunity for women to blur the lines between public and private. Indeed, the tenets surrounding feminist blogging echo the second-wave feminist mantra “the personal is political” by bringing personal experience to the forefront of the blogosphere (Taylor 40). Bloggers who incorporate their offline existence into their online persona show that blogs cannot be separated from the physical world; rather, they often overlap and mesh together (Angelone 82). Mommy bloggers often embody this overlap of public and private. Many of these women turn to blogging as a way of “maintaining a familial record for posterity,” an act which is similar to creating “‘baby books’ filled with photographs and mementos from a child’s first year of life” (Daniels 43). Scholars relate this type of blogging to the “second shift,” the continuous, unpaid work that mothers must endure once they are finished at their paid day jobs. Writers have even referred to this extra blogging work as a “third shift” that mothers assume in addition to parenting and working. While this “third shift” may seem like added stress, blogging, for many mothers, serves as a creative outlet that enables resistance to the “second shift” by calling

attention to the hardships and struggles that mothers face in their offline lives. Furthermore, these blogs serve not as an escape from their gendered material realities, but as a way to “affirm their...corporal reality as women...[and] as a mechanism for coping with the exigencies of that reality.” For this reason, Lopez describes mommy blogging as “radical” because women are able to provide unfiltered stories that bypass the censorship of corporate media (qtd. in Daniels 52). In “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog,” Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd argue that bloggers seem more “authentic” than writers in other mediums because they are not subject to corporatized institutions like newspapers or publishing companies (11). As I explain in the following chapter, this perception of identity will play a significant role in how the secular mommy bloggers develop their ethos.

## Chapter 2: Methods

### Rationale

When I began this project, I hoped to start a conversation about how nonbelievers use language, but I also wanted to take a multifaceted approach that addressed gender issues within nonbeliever discourse, since women constitute a minority within the nonbeliever population. Thus, I wondered why men are more likely to identify as nonbelievers and how gender might affect nonbeliever discourse. Ultimately, in order to explore this topic, I decided to examine the language used by “mommy bloggers” in the online secular parenting community. While issues surrounding gender and motherhood serve as the primary framework for my research, since I’m examining a particular discourse medium, genre will also factor into my analysis.

I discovered the online secular parenting community through a random perusal of *CNN*’s website. I clicked on a link advertising *CNN*’s most popular iReports of 2013, which led me to Deborah Mitchell’s “Why I Raise My Children Without God.” Since I was raised in a predominantly secular household, this iReport immediately caught my attention. Within the iReport was a link to Mitchell’s blog, *Kids Without Religion*. After viewing her blog and looking through the linked pages on her “blog roll,” I realized that Mitchell’s blog is not an isolated piece of discourse; rather, there is an entire blogging community devoted to parenting without religion. Both mothers and fathers contribute to the discussion, but I decided to focus on the mothers in the community because of the heightened attention to “mommy blogging” both in the media and in academia. Academic studies on mommy bloggers primarily focus on their sense of identity and how that contributes to their sense of community (Lawson, Lee, Morrison), mommy bloggers’ potential to challenge the expectations and norms surrounding motherhood (Crosby, Lawson, Lopez), and the commodification of motherhood through mommy blogs (Daniels,

Lawson). All of these studies examine mommy bloggers as a cohesive whole, not necessarily accounting for the nuances of their subject matter and their identities beyond mothers (except for Crosby who specifically writes about mommy bloggers who ascribe to the quiverfull movement<sup>2</sup>). Therefore, my research builds on to these previous studies by looking at a particular group of mothers who frame their blogs around their lack of belief and how that affects their parenting roles and parenting decisions. Additionally, blogs in general provide dynamic spaces that enable fluid conversations between strangers or people who live in different locations, which can be beneficial for subjugated or marginalized groups of people who do not receive physical, embodied support from those surrounding them (Jack 340, Stavrositu and Sundar 2782). Furthermore, blogs present specific rhetorical opportunities, like “transformed modes of interaction” with readers that allow for commentary and dynamic participation, that do not exist in more traditional, print mediums (McKee and DeVoss 10). Therefore, a study of secular mommy bloggers provides an opportunity to look at how both gender and genre affect nonbeliever discourse.

In order to explore gender issues within nonbeliever discourse, I rely on the following research questions: 1) How do secular mommy bloggers create identity and build ethos within a traditionally male-dominated conversation? 2) In what ways does blogging as their chosen communication medium affect how they use language to create identity and build ethos? 3) And, furthermore, in what ways do these identities impact rhetorical understandings of blogging communities and nonbeliever discourse more generally?

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<sup>2</sup> Quiverfull is an evangelical Christian movement that promotes procreation and large families and condemns all forms of birth control.

## Theoretical Framework

To answer and explore these questions, I analyze specific posts within *Agnostic Mom*, *Kids Without Religion*, *Natural Wonderers*, and *The Secular Parent*, the secular mommy blogs in this study, using theories of identity and ethos and utilize Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd's "Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog" as the basis for my analysis.

### *Identity*

In order to investigate how secular mommy bloggers construct their identities and how identity construction functions rhetorically within their writing, I look to social identity theory and identity theory in combination with Kenneth Burke's concept of identification. Social identity theory and identity theory are similar in that they both operate on the assumption that "the self is reflexive" and constructs identity in relation to categories or classifications that exist outside the self. In social identity theory this process is called "self-categorization," and in identity theory it is "identification" (Stets and Burke 224). These two processes differ in the types of categories that the self uses to create identity. In social identity theory, the self formulates identity through memberships in social groups, whereas, in identity theory, the self contrives identity through the roles it occupies and the "meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Stets and Burke 225). Therefore, since identity depends on external, societal influences, it cannot be divorced from communication and interaction with others. Thus, the concept of identity is innately rhetorical. Burke characterizes the relationship between rhetoric and identity in *The Rhetoric of Motives*, where he uses the concept of identification to evaluate the role of persuasion within rhetoric and widen rhetoric's scope to include its effect on human relations and social cohesion. Burke argues that in order for persuasion to take place, the audience must "identify" either with the rhetor or with the topic that

the rhetor addresses. But, in order for identification to occur, there has to be some kind of division between individuals: “A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B...Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate” (Burke 20-21). Being both joined and separate is imperative for identification. If the rhetor and the audience cannot join together, then there is no unity or common understanding. But without that separation, there is no need for the exchange to even occur. Thus, identification creates a space for distinct individuals to reach common ground, and achieving that common ground serves to enhance the rhetor’s ethos. Therefore, I argue that a rhetor, or a group of rhetors, cannot build ethos without first performing the act of identification and/or establishing identity. Depending on the rhetorical situation, the identity of the rhetor may play less of a role in establishing ethos, but identification with the audience must always occur. As I previously address in the Literature Review, identity often plays a central role in how women communicate online. Therefore, I argue that the secular mommy bloggers’ identities are central to their identification with the audience.

### *Ethos*

While there are numerous interpretations and theories building off of Aristotle’s ethos, for this study, I focus specifically on ethos as a “dwelling place.” In *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith provide two interpretations that center on the idea of ethos as a dwelling place. First, Hyde characterizes Aristotle’s understanding of ethos as “an artful ethos,” “a mode of artistic achievement...that brings to mind a person’s moral character, communal existence, and oratorical skill” (xvi-xvii). Here, Hyde complicates Aristotle’s conception of ethos

by suggesting that it is more than a tactic relegated to specific oratorical or textual events. He asks, “does not Aristotle’s understanding of artful ethos presuppose that the character that takes place in the orator’s specific text is itself contextualized and thereby made possible by social, political, and rhetorical transactions that inform the orator’s and his audience’s ongoing communal existence: the ‘places,’ ‘habits,’ and ‘haunts’ (ethea) wherein people dwell and bond together?” (Hyde xvi). Thus, Hyde suggests that ethos goes beyond the speech or textual event itself and is more than just an end product of discourse or a part of the persuasive process; rather, the construction of ethos provides a “space” for “collaborative and moral deliberation” (xvii). As I will show in the next chapter, secular mommy bloggers use collaboration and deliberation to construct both individual and community ethos. Furthermore, they build their reputations based off of their past writing and also what other writers in their community have contributed to the conversation. Therefore, their ethos does not exist within an isolated piece of discourse; instead, it develops over time and throughout multiple texts and interactions with other writers, ultimately contributing to a community ethos.

Next, Smith expands on this notion of ethos as a dwelling place by asking, “where for Aristotle does ethos dwell?” Smith first provides us with the most obvious answer: in the rhetor’s “personal character” (2). But he then moves to other “locations” that might not seem as apparent: “the virtue of the culture” and the audience (Smith 5). He says, since “it is not enough for a speaker to be good, a speaker must understand virtue,” and a “virtue” is determined by cultural norms. Furthermore, “what the audience believes is honorable is more persuasive than what is actually honorable. Determining the audience’s beliefs is the key to successful adaptation in terms of building credibility” (Smith 6). In other words, in order to build ethos, a rhetor, or group of rhetors, must establish a relationship with the audience that reflects a mutual understanding of

virtue dictated by cultural norms and values. Essentially, the rhetor needs to identify with his or her audience in order to create a space for ethos and the opportunity to build credibility. Thus, in this study, I highlight the rhetorical tactics that secular mommy bloggers use to cultivate identity in order to establish a relationship with their audience.

Lastly, Smith also argues that “ethos has an ontological dimension because it emerges from the way one makes decisions, the way one lives on a day-to-day basis;” essentially, ethos is a way of being in the world and manifests itself in everyday language and interactions (2). Thus, when ethos is understood as a dwelling place, it constitutes not only the rhetor but also the audience and the environment. Therefore, a rhetor’s understanding of the audience and the values and traditions surrounding culture does not simply build the rhetor’s ethos; rather, the audience and culture constitute the elements of ethos; without them, ethos would not exist. Therefore, the rhetor must “convene” with the audience and society in order to create a shared consciousness. This shared consciousness manifests in the process of identification; therefore, identity is essential to building the ethos of both an individual and a community.

### *Blogs and Social Action*

The basis of my analysis for the secular mommy bloggers stems from Carolyn M. Miller and Dawn Shepherd’s “Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog.” In this article, Miller and Shepherd examine the *kairos* of the blog, highlighting the weakening of the public and private that, Miller and Shepherd argue, began with the emergence of reality television in the 90s and the publicity surrounding celebrity and political scandal, like the Clinton-Lewinsky affair (3). Miller and Shepherd argue that this collapsing of the public and private, along with the fascination of celebrity, paved the way for the popularity of blogs because, just like with reality television and highly publicized celebrity lifestyles, blogs feed

viewer's appetite for "the pursuit of 'truth' in an increasingly media-saturated world" because they "seem to provide a less mediated and thus more authentic 'reality'" (4). Furthermore, blogs provide people with a sense of community and give disenfranchised individuals "an opportunity to instruct and enlighten through the only forum available to them" (5).

Therefore, defining identity and cultivating personality are essential to blogging, and the central features of blogs, "their reverse chronology, frequent updating, and combination of links with personal commentary," enhance personality development because they "combine the immediacy real and the genuinely personal" (Miller and Shepherd 6, 7). Thus, "The 'reality' offered by blogs is...a thoroughly perspectival reality, anchored in the personality of the writer," which, because of their formats, makes this reality seem "immediate" or "*un*-mediated" (Miller and Shepherd 7). This illusion of immediacy and spontaneity sets blogs apart from other textual media, like books, because, while book authors can and do establish identity and personality through their writing, the personality established by bloggers *seems* more authentic because they become "their own editors and publishers, gaining independence from corporate media and direct access to their audience" (Miller and Shepherd 11). On the other hand, books, especially those published by major publishing houses, must undergo rigorous editing processes and cannot reach their audiences with simply the click of a button. Furthermore, if they are published by a well-known publishing company, they are born from a corporatized structure. Therefore, although bloggers do in fact mediate (and most likely edit) the content on their blogs, the identity and personality that they portray *seems* more authentic than those presented in books because their presence seems unmediated through the formatting and the apparent self-ownership of the blog.

Miller and Shepherd further argue that blogging performs a social action because when bloggers cultivate their personalities, they are “disclosing” the self, and “The self that is ‘disclosed’ is a construction” (18). And that construction is an “ongoing event” that develops with each post that is published. Furthermore, this ongoing act of self-disclosure helps to “build connections with others,” which promotes “community building” and allows communities to raise consciousness about issues that affect them (Miller and Shepherd 8). Ultimately, I argue that this social action that Miller and Shepherd describe represents the process that secular mommy bloggers use to develop their ethos as a distinct and significant group within the nonbeliever population. It is the secular mommy blogger’s emphasis on the personal and on their identities as mothers that sets them apart from dominant groups like the new atheists who frame their arguments using scientific, institutional discourse.

### **Using Blogs as Artifacts**

For some scholars, blogging is considered a “public act of writing for an implicit audience” (Hookway 105). But, in reality, what constitutes as private and what constitutes as public in online spaces remains highly ambiguous. Therefore, using blogs as artifacts in academic research can pose some complex ethical questions. How public do these bloggers actually want to be? Could my research bring unwanted attention to these writers (Banks and Eble)? In an attempt to avoid these potential conflicts, I chose bloggers who are prominent in the secular parenting community, who have published work on similar subjects in venues other than their blog, and who openly associate their names with their blogs and other pieces of writing. Therefore, I consider the blogs in my analysis as forms of public discourse open to interpretation and analysis.

## Description of Dataset Artifacts

In this section, I describe the blogs that I analyzed for this project and also my rationale and process for choosing these pieces of discourse.

### *Choosing the Blogs*

Choosing the blogs for my dataset turned out to be a complicated process. The mommy bloggers in the secular parenting community are all average citizens, so they don't belong to any bestseller lists, and no books or websites laud their professional credentials. Therefore, I had to establish other criteria for selecting the blogs that would best represent the community. I chose the first secular parenting blog that I encountered, *Kids Without Religion*, because the author, Deborah Mitchell, received so much attention after she published her CNN iReport. Also, after perusing her blog, I noticed that she had a significant number of comments on many of her posts, and she had published a book; therefore, I inferred that she at least had a somewhat prominent status within the secular parenting community. Thus, I decided to use these same status markers—comments and outside publications—to evaluate and choose the other blogs in my dataset. I found these other blogs using Google and by following links on websites.

When I first began my search, I typed “secular parenting blogs” into the Google search box. The first result was a blog entitled *The Meming of Life: On Secular Parenting and Other Natural Wonders*. The author, Dale McGowan, has written four of his own books and excerpts in two other books, and he was named the 2008 Harvard Humanist of the Year. From this information, I concluded that he is a credible leader in the community (McGowan). Therefore, since he seemed like a trusted source within the secular parenting community, I decided to use his list of linked blogs to find the rest of the blogs for my dataset. After clicking on all the links, I ultimately chose *Agnostic Mom*; *Natural Wonderers* (previously called *Relax, It's Just God*); and

*The Secular Parent* because all four of these blogs had significantly more comments than all the other blogs on the list, and the authors had all published work outside of their blogs. Noell Hyman, author of *Agnostic Mom*, wrote a column for *Humanist Network News*; Wendy Thomas Russell, author of *Natural Wonderers*, has written several books and a multitude of essays and articles; and Be-Asia McKerracher, author of *The Secular Parent*, has published a book and written several articles. Since these blogs have hundreds of posts in total, I had to narrow down the number of posts that I would include in my dataset. In the following section, I outline my criteria for choosing those posts and also provide tables that lists each chosen post, the date it was published, and the number of comments it received.

### *Choosing the Blog Posts*

Since I was working in a limited timeframe, it was not realistic for me to analyze every single post in each of the four blogs. Therefore, I had to establish a criteria for choosing which posts would be included in my dataset. First, I had to figure out exactly how many posts I wanted to include; I decided that twenty posts from each blog would be a manageable number for my timeframe and would also provide a sufficient representation of the discourse. I chose these posts using criterion sampling, with the number of comments on each post serving as my criteria (Blythe 207-208). I went through each post on the four blogs and picked the twenty posts that had the most comments. Since these posts incited more conversation than other posts, I thought they would provide me with the richest content. Also, using purely numerical criteria prevents me from choosing posts based on my own inherent and inevitable biases.

Below, I've included four tables, one for each blog, that list the titles of the chosen posts, the date they were published, and the number of comments. *The Secular Parent* did not have dates associated with each post, so that table will only include the post title and the number of

comments. This could be a potential problem with the dataset, but since the comments on these posts include dates, I was able to estimate the range of years that these posts may have been published. Although it would have been more beneficial to have the exact dates, based on the comment dates, the posts do not seem to be significantly older or newer than the rest of the posts in my dataset.

*Table 1: Agnostic Mom*

<b>Post Title</b>	<b>Date Published</b>	<b># of comments</b>
Prayer Jokes	6/27/2009	27
An Interesting Deconversion Story of a Pastor	1/29/2009	26
A Question about the Soul	3/9/2007	72
Regarding the Soul	3/5/2007	55
Coming Out of the Closet as Atheist or Agnostic	1/9/2007	27
Humans as Animals and Ethics	11/11/2006	54
Protecting Your Child from Discrimination?	10/15/2006	54
Evolutionary Psychology and Materialism as a World View	8/2/2006	29
How Do You Talk to Your Kids About Death?	6/16/2006	30
The End, as We Know It	6/14/2006	45
Breaking It Down	5/19/2006	43
A System for Morality	5/11/2006	45
National Day of Prayer	5/5/2006	28
Public Relations Makeover, Part 2	4/27/2006	29
To Easter Bunny or Not to Easter Bunny?	4/13/2006	40
The Pledge of Allegiance	3/23/2006	43
Religious Peer Pressure on Your Teenage Child	2/27/2006	27
Amazing	2/24/2006	34
Science Versus Philosophy: Why I.D. is the Latter	2/20/2006	43
In the News	2/15/2006	27

*Table 2: Kids Without Religion*

<b>Post Title</b>	<b>Date Published</b>	<b># of comments</b>
Belief Does Not Create Two Religions	6/28/2014	126
Forgiveness is Over-Rated	5/12/2014	143
Guilty	9/5/2013	101
God is an Atheist	9/1/2013	93
Religion in Public Schools	8/12/2013	108
Jokes	8/8/2013	101
Children Taking a Different Path	7/30/2013	96

The Business of Church	7/17/2013	133
What's the Point?	7/15/2013	117
Rewards and Justice	7/3/2013	98
I'll Pray for You	6/26/2013	134
Recommended Pages	6/24/2013	123
Coming Out	5/1/2013	109
Holy Communion!	4/10/2013	107
Nice Christians	4/3/2013	107
Choices	1/22/2013	112
Compliance	1/20/2013	152
Discussions	1/18/2013	381
Still Plugging Away...	1/16/2013	165
Your Comments	1/16/2013	228

*Table 3: Natural Wonderers*

<b>Post Title</b>	<b>Date Published</b>	<b># of comments</b>
The Secularization of Christmas	12/2/2013	16
Quick! What the Hell is Diwali?	11/1/2013	16
It's a Fine Line Between Truth and Propaganda	7/22/2013	13
12 Simple Differences Between Catholics and Protestants	6/10/2013	166
7 Tips for Dealing with Religious Relatives	6/3/2013	29
A Nonbeliever's Near-Death Experience	5/30/2013	44
God's (Alleged) Gender Proves Problematic	2/18/2013	16
75 Reasons to Share the Bible with Kids	11/19/2012	14
Must We "Come Out" as Nonreligious?	7/23/2012	14
Religious Charm Bracelet, Anyone? ... Anyone?	7/19/2012	23
You Don't Have to be Religious to Sing about God	5/31/2012	25
Relax, It's Just God Featured in Psychology Today	4/30/2012	14
Has a Religious Person Ever Surprised You?	3/12/2012	15
Honesty, Shmonesty	2/27/2012	19
Confessions of a Notorious Atheist	1/2/2012	30
When "I'm Praying for You" Feels Like an Insult	12/15/2011	15
10 Commandments for Talking to Kids about Religion	11/21/2011	19
Respecting Things We Don't Believe	11/3/2011	14
Thou Shalt Give Away Free Stuff	10/10/2011	20
5 Reasons I'll Read Your Blog	9/22/2011	15

Table 4: *The Secular Parent*

Post Title	# of comments
Supreme Court Decides Against Little Wesley's Favorite Book—Are They Wrong?	17
What Trijicon Scope Would Jesus Use?	26
The Sex Scene that Wasn't	14
Does Allah Have Anything Nice to Say in Sura 2?	24
The Outlier: 17, Pregnant, and Happy	14
Welcome to the Koran	39
An Open Letter to Mike Huckabee	14
So, "God's on Our Side" Because...?	23
Religion's a Joke to my Kids—So Have I Done Something Wrong?	62
Oh, Christians You Can Read the Bible; But Can You Analyze It?	22
Blond Boy in Wife-Beater, Revolver in Hand: Apparently, the Answer's in Genesis	19
Should Pastors Fear the IRS?	20
Netsurfing Thursday...	13
Stratechuk Should Stop Wasting the Court's Time and Take His Kids to Church	21
Meet Paul the Apostle: Trainer of Misogynists	15
The Playground: the New Battlefield	15
Gender Identity: Should We Let our Kids Be Who They Are?	16
Thoughts on the Confederate Flag	51
The Fall of Man, and Murderous Brothers: Gen. 2-4	15
Adam, Eve, and the Creation of the Universe. Why Secular Kids Need to Know It!	29

As you can see from the dates in the tables, these posts were published between 2006 and 2014, with all of *Agnostic Mom's* published between 2006 and 2009, *Kids Without Religion's* published between 2011 and 2014, *Natural Wonderers'* between 2011 and 2014, and based on the dates that comments were posted, between 2009 and 2014 for *The Secular Parent*. Some posts, especially those from *Agnostic Mom*, are dated (a potential weakness of the dataset), but *Agnostic Mom*, just like the other three blogs in this study, had significantly more comments than other secular parenting blogs. Therefore, I still thought it could provide rich information and, thus, considered it appropriate for this study.

## **Audience**

Throughout the Findings and Analysis chapter, I refer to the secular mommy bloggers' audience. After conducting close readings of each post in the dataset, I determined that, in their posts, the secular mommy bloggers' primarily address other secular parents looking for advice and support, and, at times, religious parents interested in another perspective on parenting. As I will show, the secular mommy bloggers often address their audience directly through questions or requests for participation. While many questions assume that their readers are also nonbelievers, some are more ambiguous. For example, in one post, Russell reflects on lying to children and wonders where parents should draw the line between fantasy and real life. She asks, "Is it harmfully misleading, for example, to let my child believe in the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny? What about super heroes and Disney princesses? Magic tricks? God? Where do we draw the line? If we don't come clean with our kids about our views on heaven, are we betraying them?" (Russell, "Honesty, Shmonesty"). Since Russell parallels the belief in fictional characters to the belief in God, this question seems primarily targeted at other nonbeliever parents, but the inclusive "we" could include any parent.

## **Coding and Analytical Categories**

Below I describe my coding methods and analytical categories for analyzing the blog posts.

### *Coding Categories*

I created the analytical categories for the secular mommy bloggers based on my research of motherhood ideology and women in the blogosphere and from patterns I noticed while reading the blog posts. The analytical categories in my coding scheme are as follows:

- Admitting to nonexpertise

- Asking for/wanting acceptance
- Asking questions for readers to answer
- Asking rhetorical questions
- Being apologetic about beliefs or condemning “angry atheists”
- Defending a belief or argument
- Discussing personal accomplishments
- Giving advice
- Inviting conversation or participation
- Personal opinion
- Quoting or referencing other bloggers in the community
- Quoting or referencing other writers or people outside of the blogging community
- Quoting or referencing readers or commenters
- References to personal life
- References to people who have threatened them or made them feel threatened
- Referencing children
- Showing expertise
- Taking an accepting tone toward religion
- Taking an agonistic tone toward religion
- Using comparisons/metaphors
- Using humor

### *Coding Procedures*

After constructing coding categories, I used Dedoose, an online application for mixed methods research, to code each blog post and find patterns. When applying the above codes, I

used rhetorical units as my units of analysis because each unit represented a rhetorical move with a specific rhetorical function (Blythe 210). Furthermore, sometimes one code would apply to an entire post, so working in t-units, “principle clause[s] and any subordinate clauses or nonclausal structures attached to or embedded in it,” would not be sufficient (qtd. in Blythe 210). I also treated each unit as a latent unit since I had to “interpret and infer purpose” based on context (Blythe 215). I used Dedoose primarily as a tool for qualitative analysis; therefore, the examples that I present in my Findings and Analysis chapter represent specific instances from my codes and the themes I saw emerging from those codes.

### **Chapter 3: Findings and Analysis**

In this chapter, I present my findings by outlining the process that secular mommy bloggers enact to establish ethos. Within this process I highlight some common themes I saw emerging from the secular mommy bloggers' posts. As I explained in the previous chapter, these themes were identified by a combination of the coding schemes for my data and theories surrounding identity, ethos, and blogging as social action. These themes include:

1. Establishing identity: examines how secular mommy bloggers establish identity and use the process of identification to make an initial connection with the audience in preparation to create a space where they can construct their individual ethos.
2. Constructing individual ethos: illustrates how the secular mommy bloggers construct their individual ethos by developing their personal character and establishing a relationship with their readers
3. Constructing community ethos: shows how the secular mommy bloggers' cultivation of individual ethos contributes to a community ethos that emphasizes diversity, deliberation, and acceptance

By highlighting these three themes, my goal is to answer the questions I formulated at the beginning of my research: How do secular mommy bloggers rhetorically set themselves apart in order to create identity and build ethos within a traditionally male dominated discourse? In what ways does the use of blogging as their chosen communication medium affect how they use language to create identity and build ethos? And, furthermore, in what ways do these identities impact rhetorical understandings of nonbeliever discourse more generally? By answering these questions, I contribute to conversations of secular rhetorics by emphasizing the gendered significance of dominant secular rhetoric. Furthermore, I build on Miller and Shepherd's

“Blogging as Social Action” by showing how individual bloggers directly contribute to the culture and ethos of a blogging community.

### **Establishing Identity**

As previously stated in the section Motherhood, Community, and the Blogosphere, many blogging platforms provide multiple outlets for bloggers to establish identity, including in the title of the blog, the “About” section, and within the content of their posts. Bloggers can first use the title and the “About” section to provide a preview of the identity that they want to cultivate within their blog posts. Furthermore, as stated in the Methods section, according to social identity theory and identity theory, people tend to formulate their identities based on the roles that they occupy and on the social groups they identify and associate with. The secular mommy bloggers in this study have chosen to cultivate their identities in terms of their roles as mothers and their association with a particular social group, nonbelievers in the United States. In this section, I show how the cultivation of those identities connects them with their intended audience, representing Burke’s process of identification, which, I argue, is essential for each mother to build her ethos.

All four secular mommy bloggers in this study first establish their identities as both mothers and nonbelievers either in their titles or “About” sections, or both. Three out of the four blogs (*Kids Without Religion*, *The Secular Parent*, and *Agnostic Mom*) directly reference motherhood, parenthood, or children. Only one of the blog titles, *Natural Wonderers*, has no direct reference to parenting or children. Furthermore, each of their titles have some kind of catchphrase underneath them that further emphasizes their nonbelief and their roles as mothers:

- “Raising a healthy family without religion” (*Agnostic Mom*)
- “Raising kids as independent, logical thinkers” (*Kids Without Religion*)

- “Raising curious, compassionate kids in a secular family” (*Natural Wonderers*)
- “Parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (*The Secular Parent*)

All four catchphrases begin with active verbs associated with childrearing, and three of them use the same active verb, “raising.” Here is an example where the bloggers begin to use identity to potentially establish a connection with their readers. Beginning the catchphrases with these verbs shows that they are actively engaged in parenthood and blogging about their current experiences. Since their targeted audiences are other secular parents, or religious parents trying to understand a different perspective, the act of “parenting” or “raising” children gives them an initial connection. Furthermore, two of the four catchphrases list some values that they want to instill in their children. These short lists give readers a preview of their parenting styles. Even if other parents reading their blogs have different values and parenting styles, they still have the act of parenting in common.

Next, the secular mommy bloggers further cultivate their identities as mothers and nonbelievers in their “About” sections, providing brief snippets that complement their catchphrases and serve as their parenting philosophies. For instance, Deborah Mitchell, author of *Kids Without Religion*, in her “About” section says, “I am raising my kids to be agnostic, free-thinking, compassionate and peace-loving.” Similarly, Be-Asia McKerracher, author of *The Secular Parent*, says, “*The Secular Parent* began as a place to house my frustrations with being an Agnostic mother who decided that her children did not need religion to be morally strong, decent citizens of humanity... The main condition of secular parenting is a willingness to learn; secular parents must be guided by what we know to be true; that is the only way that we can really prepare our children for success in life.” Wendy Thomas Russell, author of *Natural Wonderers*, also expresses her desire “to raise well-informed, open-minded children who feel

empowered to make up their own minds about what to believe” in her “About” section. Here, all three mothers outline the values that they want to instill in their children<sup>3</sup>. Once again, even if all the parents reading their blogs don’t share those same values, they can still identify with Mitchell, McKerracher, and Russell because, as parents, they are also trying to teach and raise their children according to their own personal philosophy.

But these values that they outline are not just the character traits that they want to cultivate in their children. They also represent the values that they, as mothers and nonbelievers, choose to personally uphold. These values present a stark contrast to the “angry, militaristic” atheist stereotype and also to some of the dominant voices in the nonbeliever population, like the new atheists I describe earlier in this study, who completely denounce religion. Therefore, these “About” sections not only serve as previews of their parenting styles but also as avenues to establish their identities within the general population of nonbelievers. Additionally, they also reflect the values that they associate with healthy, respectful discourse. As I will show later in this analysis, these values go beyond individual mothers’ identities and serve to cultivate the ethos of the entire blogging community.

The cultivation of identity does not end with these introductory elements; rather, just as ethos develops throughout a text or series of texts, the secular mommy bloggers continue to build on to the identities within their posts. It is in their posts where we see just how significant their roles as mothers factor into the development of their blogging persona. For instance, I recorded 49 instances across 25 different posts where the secular mommy bloggers referenced their children. Hyman references her children 10 times in six out of 20 posts, Mitchell 11 times in six out of 20 posts, McKerracher 26 times in 12 out of 20 posts, and Russell 28 times in 13 out of 20

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<sup>3</sup> Noell Hyman, author of *Agnostic Mom*, is the only mother in this study who does not discuss her role as a nonbeliever parent in her “About” section.

posts. Comparatively, I also recorded how many times they referenced an aspect of their personal life that did not involve their children or their family: Hyman references her personal life four times in three out of 20 posts, Mitchell nine times in seven out of 20 posts, McKerracher five times in two out of 20 posts, and Russell 10 times in nine out of 20 posts. While I do not reference the frequency of my codes anywhere else in the analysis, in this instance I think the numbers are telling. Excluding Mitchell, all the mothers in my study and within my particular dataset reference their children significantly more than they reference any other part of their personal lives.

Furthermore, some of the secular mommy bloggers in this study openly discuss feeling guilt as nonbeliever parents. In the post, “Religion’s a Joke to My Kids—So Have I Done Something Wrong?” McKerracher reflects on an incident where her daughter decides that she’s going to pray to the “peanut God” because he is “wonderful, and he smells great!” After this conversation with her daughter, McKerracher worries that her lack of belief has caused her children to think of religion as a joke. She attributes this guilt to “being raised in a faith” (“Religion’s a Joke”). Similarly, Mitchell expresses her own feelings of guilt about her lack of belief, which she also ties to growing up in a religious household. In the post, “Guilty,” she reflects on why she feels this guilt. She says, “we feel bad” because “we have to reject the teachings of our parents, whom we were taught to obey and respect (honor thy father and mother), and we know this disappoints them.” She said that when her children were little, she felt guilty that she was not following tradition and taking them to church “as [her] mother had taken [her]” (“Guilty”). Here, both McKerracher and Mitchell discuss guilt not just in terms of their own nonbelief but also in how their nonbelief has affected their children. As stated previously, this guilt potentially connects to the unrealistic expectations that society has set for mothers, and

religious ideals, in part, have influenced these expectations. While the secular mommy bloggers do not subscribe to those particular religious ideals, since religion is such a large part of American society, they are still affected by the ideology. These admissions of guilt are key components in the identities that the secular mommy bloggers cultivate because they align themselves with every other mother who has ever felt inadequate.

This motherly guilt and the numerous references to their children, along with the blog titles and “About” sections, thoroughly emphasize their identities as mothers. And while they do discuss topics other than parenting or their children and also cultivate their identities as nonbelievers, it is their roles as mothers that, at least in some ways, influence the values they hold as nonbelievers and initiate the process of identification between them and their audiences and allow them to create a discursive space.

### **Constructing individual ethos**

Before I continue my analysis, I want to return to Smith’s interpretation of ethos as a dwelling place. In his interpretation, Smith argues that ethos lies in the rhetor’s “personal character,” the audience, and “the virtue of the culture” (2, 5). Essentially, he argues that the rhetor will build his or her personal character based on the audience and the culture surrounding them. So, in this sense, developing ethos is much more complex than simply assuring your audience that you are trustworthy and credible. Rather, in order to cultivate ethos, the rhetor must create a discursive space where they establish a relationship with the audience and show that they are a part of the audience’s culture. In this case, that discursive space is the blogosphere, which enables writers to have direct contact with their audience. In the previous section, I showed how the rhetor’s presentation of identity initiates the process of identification, which opens up the discursive space needed to begin a conversation. Now, in this section, I examine the

ways in which secular mommy bloggers develop their individual ethos based on their identities, the expectations of their readers, and in how they interact with their readers. I show how secular mommy bloggers highlight the personal experiences and aspects of their personal character most conducive to their audience's own experiences and expectations. Since the secular mommy bloggers have direct contact with their audience members, I argue that they can more easily develop an ethos driven by audience values. To demonstrate this, I examine the ways in which they discuss personal experiences with religion, how they handle topics of religion with their children, and how they interact with their readers.

*Personal experiences with religion*

When the secular mommy bloggers discuss their personal experiences with religion, they tend to focus on similar themes: what religion they were raised in; their relationships and interactions with religious family members, friends, and strangers; and any guilt they have associated with religion. At some point in their posts, three out of the four secular mommy bloggers (Hyman, Mitchell, Russell) mention the religions in which they were raised: Russell briefly mentions that she was baptized in the Unitarian church (“Relax, It’s Just God Featured”); Mitchell alludes to her Catholic upbringing (“Coming Out”); and Hyman dedicates almost an entire post to her upbringing and participation in the Mormon Church (“Coming Out of the Closet”). Russell only mentions her religious background because an article about her blog in *Psychology Today* mistakenly said that she was raised Presbyterian and Methodist when she only attended those churches periodically in her childhood (“Relax, It’s Just God Featured”). But Hyman and Russell bring up their religious pasts in order to talk about an experience (or experiences) that might be familiar to some of their audience members as well: going “public” or “coming out” as nonreligious.

Before I explore the ways Hyman and Mitchell talk about “coming out,” I want to first touch on the implications of using that term. Traditionally, the metaphor “coming out of the closet” refers to when an LGBTQ individual first discloses his or her sexual orientation. It is a highly sensitive event and a significant part of LGBTQ members’ identity formation. But the atheist/nonbeliever population has appropriated the metaphor because many nonbelievers fear the ostracization that they potentially face if they reveal their lack of faith within a highly religious community. There is even a movement called The Out Campaign (which is endorsed by Richard Dawkins) that encourages atheists and other nonbelievers to “COME OUT of the closet!” in order “to let others know they are not alone” and to “[open] a conversation and help to demolish the negative stereotypes of atheists” (Dawkins). I point to this example to show that the use of this metaphor is not confined to Hyman and Mitchell’s posts; rather, it is ubiquitous to nonbeliever discourse. But Hyman and Mitchell frame the “coming out” process as an experience unique to each individual.

First, Mitchell sets up her “coming out” post (titled simply “Coming Out”) as a series of questions and different pieces of advice depending on how readers answer each question. Within those pieces of advice, she recalls how she came out (or decided to not come out) to certain friends and family members. For example, under her first question, “Is keeping quiet and playing along causing you grief?” she says that she chose not to come out to her grandmother while she was alive because she was “a devout Catholic” who “believed with every last cell in her body that she would meet her entire family in heaven” (Mitchell, “Coming Out”). Mitchell decided that there was no point in hurting her because “she would only worry..., and she did not have the ability to even begin to understand why I’m a nonbeliever” (“Coming Out”). But Mitchell did decide that it was essential for her to tell her parents and that, ever since, a “chasm” has existed

between them because her mother is “fearful” that Mitchell and her family “ will not be ‘saved’” and that they will go to the “deep, deep south after [they] die” (“Coming Out”). But she says that she still listens to her mother when she talks about religion and does not get offended when her mother says that she is praying for her. Mitchell says, “Her prayers don’t hurt me, but they bring her some kind of comfort” (“Coming Out”).

As Mitchell relays her personal decisions in terms of coming out as a nonbeliever, she reinforces some of the values that she lays out in her blog catchphrase and her “About” section: compassion, peace, and logic. By not revealing her lack of belief to her grandmother and still allowing her mother to discuss religion around her, she shows compassion for her family members and empathizes with their feelings. She knows that religion is an important aspect of their lives, and she does not want to begrudge them of their experiences or get into any confrontations. Furthermore, she uses a logical thought process to evaluate whether it is worth exposing her lack of belief, and she lays out that thought process for others to follow. Here, she continues to reinforce her identity as an accepting nonbeliever and, in turn, cultivates her ethos because, through her personal coming out experiences and her acknowledgement of her audience’s similar struggles, she exemplifies the traits that she ascribes to an accepting nonbeliever. Furthermore, her personal experiences manifest within guidelines for her audience. Thus, she uses these examples not only for self-disclosure but also to help others who potentially face similar situations.

Next, in Hyman’s post about coming out, she focuses specifically on her own experiences. Hyman, perhaps, has the deepest religious past. She grew up in the Mormon Church, was actively involved in leadership positions, and did not choose to leave it until well into her adult life. For Hyman, and for most members of the Mormon Church, Mormonism was

not just her religion; it was also her lifestyle. Some of the tenets of Mormonism, like their dress code, carried over into her life outside of the church. Since so much of her life centered around Mormonism, she was “really nervous about the social implications” of leaving the church. She decided to reveal her lack of belief to her family when her sister was about to get married. She says, “You have to hold what is called a ‘recommend’ in order to go in [to the church]. My recommend had expired during the time that I was trying to figure out my beliefs. I could not get a new one and keep my integrity in tact because you must proclaim your belief that Jesus is the Christ and Joseph Smith was his prophet in order to do so” (Hyman, “Coming Out of the Closet”). Her parents “didn’t take it well,” but “after four and a half years” their relationship has improved because “they have seen that [Hyman’s] children continue to hold excellent standards and principles...and they have seen that [she] is happy and non-disruptive to their religious lives” (“Coming Out of the Closet”). She also decided to come out to her friends because she would no longer abide by the Mormon dress code, and she “didn’t want them to assume the wrong things about [her].” She said that her coming out to her friends was “awkward” and “shocked and hurt them,” but she still think it was beneficial, and that it is ultimately beneficial for others in similar situations, because it allows nonbelievers “to be who [they] are not have to hide” (Hyman, “Coming Out of the Closet”).

Hyman’s coming out story contains some similarities to Mitchell’s and also serves a similar rhetorical purpose. First, just like Mitchell, she went through a process of deliberation to determine if her self-disclosure was worth it. She decided that keeping her nonbelief a secret was causing her grief because she was having to lie about almost every aspect of her life. In this case, concealing this part of her identity from her family and friends was unhealthy, and her personal health and well-being were more important than avoiding her family and friends’

disappointment. Hyman's catchphrase for her blog is "raising a healthy family without religion."

In this coming out post, she identifies going out of your comfort zone and being yourself as a part of a healthy lifestyle for all nonbelievers (Hyman, "Coming Out of the Closet").

Furthermore, although her family and friends initially did not approve of her nonbelief, they now have a better relationship founded on mutual understanding and respect for each other's beliefs.

Therefore, this post, just like Mitchell's, also reinforces the values that Hyman associates with her identity as an accepting nonbeliever.

Two of the four secular mommy bloggers highlight another common interaction and potential conflict that nonbelievers face: when someone says, "I'll pray for you." In Mitchell's post, titled "I'll Pray for You," she argues that nonbelievers should, in most cases, not be offended when a religious friend, relative, or stranger says, "I'll pray for you" because "some believers just don't have the awareness or language to use" when speaking to a nonbeliever friend who is currently in some kind of distress ("I'll Pray for You"). Saying "I'll pray for you" is simply a conditioned reaction to bad news. Mitchell says that she thinks of it as "a verbal hug of sorts" and that "it's connecting in much the same way as smiling at a stranger or shaking a hand" (I'll Pray for You"). She then goes on to encourage nonbelievers to simply say, "Thank you for thinking of me" because confronting them or providing any kind of negative response just "cause disharmony," and that nonbelievers, instead, should "encourage good will" (I'll Pray for You"). She concludes the post with her own experience:

"When a dear friend, who knows I'm agnostic, told me she was praying for me through difficult times, I told her I appreciated her concern and her good intentions. Her prayers don't hurt (or help) me. But they made her feel like she was doing something useful, and she was letting me know that she cares for me in the way she's been trained for 40 years. I imagine that, had I told her not to pray for me, I would have hurt her feelings." (I'll Pray for You")

Russell takes a similar attitude in her post. She says that she is not offended when people say they're praying for her because "it touches [her] to think that, whether or not a higher power is ostensibly involved, those people are sharing their hearts in such an intimate way. I can only assume it makes them feel better, too" ("When 'I'm Praying for You'"). She also says that a simple "thank you" is all you need when someone says they're praying for you, even if their intention is to demean you, because it simply cuts off the conversation and prevents an argument. Additionally, just like Mitchell, she says, "In the grand scheme of things, prayer is pretty darn harmless... People who pray are unlikely to be hurting anyone—including you" ("When 'I'm Praying for You'").

Just as with the "coming out" stories, Mitchell and Russell highlight their personal views and experiences surrounding potentially uncomfortable interactions with religious friends, family members, or strangers. Once again, through these experiences, they build their personal character around the values that they set forth in their catchphrases and "About" sections. These particular experiences exemplify a trait that both mothers value: compassion. In these situations, Mitchell and Russell ask that their readers consider the believer's point of view. In most cases, when someone says "I'll pray for you" it is because they are concerned and want to show you that they care. As Mitchell said, it's almost like a "hug" meant to help forge a connection and provide comfort. Therefore, as Mitchell and Russell argue, what's the point in being negative and making someone uncomfortable when they are simply trying to comfort you? In this case, gratitude is the appropriate response, and having compassion is more important than making a point. Their arguments also reinforce their identities as accepting nonbelievers and set them apart from new atheists like Dawkins and Harris who denounce the respect of religious beliefs. Furthermore,

Mitchell and Russell discuss this topic because, just like with “coming out,” many other nonbelievers have, or will have, encountered a similar situation.

Secular mommy bloggers reinforce their identities as accepting nonbelievers not only through promoting civility and acceptance but also by explicitly denouncing angry, antagonistic nonbelievers. In “The Playground: The New Battlefield,” McKerracher describes how she used to be one of those vindictive, antagonistic nonbelievers. She says, “My blood was wanting a fight, and logic was on my side. I’d say it just the way I felt it, which was usually pointed toward the hypocrisy I saw specifically from organized religion and religious individuals in general. I’d call out ANYONE, ANYWHERE. I had a RIGHT to criticize faith, and I was using it” (“The Playground”). She says that attitude partially stemmed from books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. When the book was first published, she aligned herself with the dominant new atheist movement. But, now, she criticizes *The God Delusion* for “inadvertently brand[ing] people—specifically Atheists—as rude, mean-spirited and arrogant” and “deem[ing] all religious people—delusional, ignorant, and mentally weak” (“The Playground”). McKerracher no longer condones this kind of attitude towards religion; instead, she wants to promote understanding between believers and nonbelievers. She says, “If I want to see the relationship between freethinkers and the faithful change, I have to bring warmth before I deliver cold” (“The Playground”).

McKerracher frames her change in attitude as a major part of the identity that she promotes in her blog. Once again, just as with previous examples, her attitude adjustment coincides with certain values that she outlines in her “About” section: being “morally strong” and a “decent citizen of humanity.” By unapologetically broadcasting her lack of belief while also respecting those who do believe, she both exudes moral strength and represents a decent

citizen. Furthermore, her accepting attitude allows her to speak to a broader audience. If she wrote about religion in an arrogant, condescending tone, she would alienate accepting nonbeliever parents who come to her blog for support, and, additionally, she would alienate religious parents who also want to provide support or wish to understand a different viewpoint. This approach to discourse emphasizes an invitational rhetoric that promotes and understanding and belonging within the blogging community.

Russell, Mitchell, and Hyman all share similar sentiments to McKerracher that serve the same rhetorical purposes. Russell says that nonbelievers should “cut the vitriol” and avoid “being snarky, arrogant or mean” (“The 10 Commandments”). Mitchell also says that nonbelievers should “avoid being hostile or belligerent” (“Coming Out”). Hyman even dedicates two entire posts (only one which made it into my dataset) to improving the image of nonbelievers (“Public Relations Makeover, Part 2”). In that post, she denounces atheist blogs with “cries for the termination of religion altogether,” “blame against the religious for all the world’s problems,” and “hyperbolic claims about religious people that are simply not true” (“Public Relations Makeover”). She also describes a campaign called “Smut for Smut,” “where college students set up a booth where they...handed porn to anyone who would give them a Bible” in order to “bring awareness to smutty passages in the Old Testament regarding women, sex, and war” (“Public Relations Makeover”). While Hyman admits that these problems in the Bible do deserve an “enlightening and educational” discussion, “offering pornography in exchange for Bibles” does not constitute a healthy discussion; instead, as Hyman argues, “it only makes [nonbelievers] look crude and hateful” (“Public Relations Makeover”). By directly admonishing these vitriolic nonbelievers, the secular mommy bloggers reinforce the identities that they promote to their audiences and deny the stereotypes commonly attributed to nonbelievers. They also attract a

broader audience, which gives them more opportunities to combat negatives stereotypes and create a sense of community where meaningful debate can occur.

### *Discussing Religion with their Children*

The secular mommy bloggers further build their character and reinforce their values by detailing the religious discussions they have with their children. As I will show in this section, the personal accounts that they describe directly reflect the ideals that they outline in their catchphrases and “About” sections, and they coincide with the values that they promote in their own experiences with religion. They use different techniques in order to instill their values into their children and highlight the scenarios that will best serve their readers and help them with their own parenting issues. In this section, I examine how they handle holidays and imaginary figures like the tooth fairy and encourage critical thinking and knowledge of religions, which teaches children to value and respect religion and other’s religious beliefs. After I summarize several examples that exemplify the techniques the secular mommy bloggers use to discuss religion with their children, I then examine how these examples work rhetorically to build the secular mommy blogger’s ethos. I argue that, just like when they describe their personal religious experiences, the secular mommy bloggers use these posts not only for self-disclosure but also as guides for their readers.

For the secular mommy bloggers, holidays are a tricky subject because many holidays have religious roots and center around imaginary figures like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Russell and Hyman both dedicate posts to their issues with holidays and how they handle them with their children. First, I return to a question I presented in the Methods section. Here, Russell, still unsure about her stance on these imaginary figures, wonders exactly how honest parents need to be with their children:

“Is it harmfully misleading...to let my child believe in the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny? What about super heroes and Disney princesses? Magic tricks? God? Where do we draw the line? If we don’t come clean about our views on heaven, are we betraying them? But if we do come clean about Santa, are we just being shitty? How are we supposed to allow the magic of childhood to endure without confusing our kids—and ourselves?” (“Honesty, Shmonesty”).

While Russell doesn’t seem to have an answer for any her questions, Hyman, who expresses similar concerns in her post “To Easter Bunny or Not to Easter Bunny,” describes how she handles imaginary figures with her children. She says that she “cannot imagine...childhood” without Santa or the Easter Bunny, so her children are introduced to these magical characters, but she does “not tell elaborate stories of how Santa gets his belly down the chimney or how the bunny gets those baskets into the house.” Also, when they start to ask, “Is Santa real?” she will reply with, “What do you think?” This provides an opportunity for “both critical thinking and imaginary play” which, she argues, are essential to a child’s development (Hyman, “To Easter Bunny”).

McKerracher also encourages critical thinking through the stories in the Bible. In her posts “Fall of Man” and “Adam, Eve, and the Creation of the Universe,” she encourages parents to read the Bible, specifically the book of Genesis, with their children and ask them questions like, “Why is knowledge a sin?” (“The Fall of Man”) or “If you could create a world, how would you do it? What would you do first? What kinds of rules would you have?” (“Adam, Eve”). These questions get children to start analyzing and questioning the things that they read and hear and also get them thinking about their own beliefs and morals. Also, she argues, it prepares them for situations where they have “to make a logical conclusion about what to do in their surroundings” and gives them the confidence to argue their own points of view (“Adam, Eve”). Additionally, these conversations give children a history lesson in one of the world’s major religions, thereby strengthening their knowledge of something that many people hold sacred.

Russell also mentions some activities that she does with her children in order to impart religious knowledge. In one post, she says that she and her daughter made a CD composed entirely of religious songs. After listening to all the tracks, they talked about the meaning behind them, and she asked her daughter which were her favorites and why (“You Don’t Have to be Religious”). She ultimately decided to take this approach because her daughter said, “Religion is boring” and that she no longer wanted to talk about it (“You Don’t Have to be Religious”). In another post, she discusses how, inspired by her childhood fascination with her mother’s dangly charm bracelets, she decided to make a charm bracelet with symbols from all kinds of religions for her daughter because she wants her to “know about religion in general, not just the one religion most prevalent in her culture” (“Religious Charm Bracelet”). In this post, she details her trip to “this cheesy bead store” where, with the help of the “bead lady” she was able to find symbols to represent Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Hinduism (“Religious Charm Bracelet”). Once again, Russell gets creative in terms of educating her daughter about religion.

In all of the above examples, the secular mommy bloggers essentially set up lessons for their children to promote critical thinking and also enhance their religious knowledge so that they will respect and understand what others believe. These posts, just like others I have described previously, continue to reinforce the secular mommy bloggers’ values and also serve as guides that all parents can follow. But not all of the posts take on the traditional tone or formatting that one might associate with a guide or a set of guidelines. While McKerracher’s post are framed specifically as guidelines, with steps to follow and example questions, Hyman and Russell’s posts seem more like stories about personal family dilemmas. While they openly provide advice and suggestions within these posts, they devote more space to the stories behind the suggestions

and how those situations affected them personally. While the secular mommy bloggers in my study are prominent within the secular parenting community, they do no claim to be experts. They are simply mothers who want to make connections with like-minded individuals, provide support for other parents who face similar problems, and gain acceptance from those outside the secular parenting community. Their posts are more about inciting conversation with their readers rather than telling them what they should and shouldn't do. Therefore, when they are giving advice to readers, they don't necessarily position themselves as experts. Instead, they frame that advice in terms of a potential conversation with their readers.

### *Interacting with their Readers*

The secular mommy bloggers directly address and interact with their readers by encouraging discussion and using inclusive and second person pronouns throughout their posts.

All four secular mommy bloggers encourage discussion in the comment sections by posing questions for readers. At the end of some of their posts, they'll ask questions like, "What are your thoughts and experiences on the matter?" (Hyman, "Religious Peer Pressure"); "What about you guys?" "What are your thoughts? What's the point in doing good deeds if your life ends in the same way that a criminal's does?" (Mitchell, "Rewards and Justice"); "Do you agree with this cause? Why or why not? If you agree, is it one you will get behind? If yes, what are you going to do about it?" (Hyman, "The Pledge of Allegiance"); "What does forgiveness mean to you?" (Mitchell, "Forgiveness is Over-Rated"); "Did I forget anything?" (McKerracher, "Thoughts on the Confederate Flag").

Sometimes the secular mommy bloggers will also request participation rather than asking for it. They'll say things like, "I cannot wait to hear everyone's opinion on this one" (Hyman, "Protecting Your Child"); "I would love to hear your experiences and/or thoughts on how to talk

to others about your beliefs” (Mitchell, “Coming Out”); “As always, I welcome a discussion from those who believe and those who do not” (Mitchell, “God is an Atheist”); “Once I share my understanding with you, maybe you can enlighten me on why I am wrong” (Hyman, “Breaking It Down”).

The questions and requests, and others similar to them, that secular mommy bloggers propose serve to carry the topic over into the comments section. While these questions and requests aren’t necessarily essential to getting people to comment (Not all of the posts in my dataset pose questions or request participation from readers, but all posts do have a significant number of comments), they show readers that the secular mommy bloggers are indeed interested in their experiences and opinions and the feedback they could potentially give.

Furthermore, the secular mommy bloggers will directly reference readers in their posts using inclusive pronouns (we, us, our) and second person personal and second person possessive pronouns (you, your). Using these pronouns in reference to readers creates a conversational tone within the posts, which forges a connection between the blogger and the reader.

### **Constructing Community Ethos**

While each secular mommy blogger does have her own individual blog, those blogs do not exist in isolation. Even if the secular mommy bloggers never directly communicate with each other, they still contribute to the same blogging community. Thus, I argue that the individual ethos that each secular mommy blogger cultivates in her personal blog influences the ethos of the entire community because the individual develops ethos from a combination of their personal identity and the cultural values of the community. Ultimately, the secular mommy bloggers contribute to a community ethos that emphasizes acceptance. The ethos that the secular mommy bloggers develop in their individual blogs is based on their identities, their values, and their

audience. The identities they cultivate in their blogs are that of mothers and accepting nonbelievers, and their values coincide with those identities. As accepting nonbeliever mothers, acceptance is central to their values. The topics they introduce, the tone that they use, and how they communicate and interact with their audience all reflect the value that they place in acceptance.

## Conclusion

### Discussion

To conclude this study, I return to the questions that began my research: 1) How do secular mommy bloggers create identity and build ethos within a traditionally male dominated conversation? 2) In what ways does blogging as their chosen communication medium affect how they use language to create identity and build ethos? 3) And, furthermore, in what ways do these identities impact rhetorical understandings of blogging communities and nonbeliever discourse more generally? Based on my analysis and the other information within my study, below, I attempt to definitively answer these questions.

*Question 1: How do secular mommy bloggers create identity and build ethos within a traditionally male dominated conversation?*

While there are numerous voices and perspectives within the nonbeliever population, the loudest voices are perhaps the new atheists, who, as stated previously are white, male public intellectuals with science backgrounds. The new atheists are vitriolic nonbelievers who think religion does not deserve respect and should be eradicated. While the new atheists do refer to some personal experiences in their books (For example, in *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins references his time as a student at Oxford.), they build their ethos primarily through science. Dawkins quotes a number of pinnacle scientists, like Albert Einstein and Carl Sagan, (33, 36) and attempts to disprove God through scientific theories such as natural selection and the anthropic principle (139-179). Similarly, in *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris dismisses religious belief or faith because of the lack of evidence behind its existence (60-73). This emphasis on scientific evidence leaves little room for any gray area where discussion can take place. In fact, the new atheists seem more driven by “converting” their audience to atheism, or getting other

nonbelievers to side with their point of view, than having a productive conversation. For instance, Dawkins jokingly says, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down” (28). Dawkins knows that this is unlikely, but he is hopeful that “people whose childhood indoctrination was not too insidious, or for other reasons didn’t ‘take’...should need only a little encouragement to break free of the vice of religion altogether” (28). Similarly, Victor Stenger (another prominent new atheist), at the end of his book *The New Atheism*, directly addresses his audience and requests that they join the new atheists’ cause: “If you are a theist or other believer, throw off your yoke and join us. If you are an agnostic, look at the evidence and see that we do in fact know that God does not exist and join us. If you are an atheist who thinks we should work with moderate believers, look at the consequences of irrational thought and join us” (244). This statement both clearly defines the new atheists’ audience (basically anyone who does not completely dismiss or reject religion) and, rather than inciting a conversation about belief, or considering the nuances behind belief or the lack of belief, simply asks others to change their thinking. Furthermore, using words and phrases like “childhood indoctrination,” “insidious,” and “throw off your yoke” creates a hostile dichotomy between those who have faith (or are sympathetic to those who have faith) and those who do not, turning belief and nonbelief into a black or white issue. And, with these statements, the new atheists place themselves in a position of authority by seeming to talk *at* their readers rather than *with* their readers. Therefore, with the new atheists, there isn’t really any room for conversation between them and their audience.

Secular mommy bloggers, on the other hand, believe that everyone, no matter what their beliefs, should be treated with respect. They use their blogs as their own spaces to cultivate their identities and build ethos based on these values of acceptance and respect. They condemn the

vitriolic nonbeliever persona and instead identify as accepting nonbelievers. As shown previously, the secular mommy bloggers, even when giving advice to their readers, frame that advice as a conversation rather than as experts speaking to an audience. Instead of asking their audience to “convert” to atheism or agnosticism, they simply ask them to accept nonbelief as another way of life that exists on a religious spectrum. While they do sometimes cite scientific experts or use science as a basis for some of their posts (For example, in “Regarding the Soul,” Hyman cites evolution for her disbelief in souls), they invoke expert opinion not to create a dichotomy between themselves and their religious readers, but to start a conversation about a certain topic or principle, and to support their opinion on that chosen topic. Furthermore, their roles as mothers are central to their identities and how they construct their ethos. They use their experiences as mothers to connect with their audience and unite people who hold different beliefs. Thus, it is their focus on identity and the conversational nature of their discourse that sets them apart from the male dominated population of nonbelievers. The secular mommy bloggers create identity and build ethos by delegating their own spaces and starting their own conversation within the male dominated population.

*Question 2: In what ways does blogging as their chosen communication medium affect how they use language to create identity and build ethos?*

While the blogosphere is not the utopian space that some imagine, blogs do provide writers with some unique opportunities. Through blogs, writers can connect with like-minded individuals and also communicate directly with their audience. Furthermore, blogs have multiple outlets where bloggers can present their identities. Secular mommy bloggers use the titles, “About” sections, and their individual posts to cultivate their identities as both mothers and accepting nonbelievers. Their titles (*Agnostic Mom, Kids Without Religion, Natural Wonderers,*

and *The Secular Parent*) along with their catchphrases and their “About” sections are foundational aspects of each blog that directly contribute to the identities that they build within their posts. These identities, along with how the secular mommy bloggers communicate with their audience, play a significant role in how they develop their ethos. In their posts, the secular mommy bloggers talk directly to their audience by asking them questions and using inclusive pronouns. Since their readers can talk back in the comments, their questions serve to encourage conversation. They are not rhetorical questions meant to prove a point or get readers to think about an issue. Furthermore, when their audience does talk back, the secular mommy bloggers will often use their feedback as ideas for new posts, or even directly quote readers in later posts. Therefore, blogging enables these mothers to develop an audience-centric ethos that promotes acceptance and a rhetorically productive discourse where a number of voices and opinions can be heard.

*Question 3: In what ways do these identities impact rhetorical understandings of blogging communities and nonbeliever discourse more generally?*

First, the secular mommy bloggers serve as an example of how online communities in general develop a community ethos. In “Blogging as Social Action,” Miller and Shepherd say, “bloggers ‘position themselves’ in the community of bloggers, indicating ‘the tribe to which they wish to belong’” (9). Here, they touch on the relationship between the individual blogger and the blogging community, but do not provide any more detail on the rhetorical implications of that relationship. As I show in the previous chapter, the secular mommy bloggers cultivate an individual ethos within each of their blogs through their identities as mothers and nonbelievers, and those individual instances of ethos development contribute to the shared consciousness of a community that promotes acceptance and productive discourse. Thus, the secular mommy

bloggers use an “invitational rhetoric,” a very feminist approach to discourse, that promotes understanding and a sense of belonging within the community and creates a safe space for conversation between individuals with varying beliefs.

Second, the secular mommy bloggers use language in a way that counters stereotypes associated with nonbelievers. Acceptance is central to how they communicate with their audience, which provides a stark contrast to the “angry, militaristic” qualities often ascribed to nonbelievers. Their language, in contrast to the new atheists, shows the nuances of nonbeliever discourse.

### **Limitations and Ideas for Further Research**

When I began this project, I intended to perform two separate rhetorical analyses on the secular mommy bloggers and the new atheists. I wanted to first establish the rhetorical practices of the dominant, mainstream voices before I examined a subversive minority group. But this idea proved unfeasible for my timeframe. Since the secular mommy bloggers are only one group within the nonbeliever population, investigating another group’s language would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of nonbeliever discourse, both in terms of gender and genre, since the new atheists are all male, and their most recognized writings are print books. Additionally, in this study, I primarily focus on the qualities that differentiate the secular mommy bloggers from male-dominated groups like the new atheists. In a broader study, I would need to also highlight the similarities between these groups in order to create a more comprehensive account of nonbeliever language use.

Furthermore, my dataset only included four blogs and eighty total blog posts. Many more blogs exist within this community, so widening the dataset could potentially strengthen my argument or lead me to new findings or conclusions. Since the secular parenting community

consists of both mothers and fathers, it would be interesting to also include fathers in the dataset in order to highlight another perspective within the community, and to potentially find more nuances within language use.

Additionally, while I briefly touched on public sphere theory in the blogosphere, it was not a central component to my analysis. Public sphere theory would provide a deeper insight into how the secular mommy bloggers form an online community and how circulation affects identity and ethos formation. Public sphere theory would also help emphasize the differences and similarities between different nonbeliever groups.

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