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www.youarewhatyoueat.com: The Religious Nature of Healthy Eating Blogs

Kate Gundersen, Class of 2010

Introduction

Hunger strikes, and I am sitting in the library. Not having packed a nutritious apple like my smug neighbor in the next cubicle, I begin the search for nourishment. The library's café offers a wide array of choices, and an intricate decision-making process ensues. A banana, perhaps? Healthy, for sure. My snack-toting neighbor might smile upon me like we belong to the same confraternity of fruit-worshippers, although I can almost hear the scoff of the environmental studies major to my left at my insensitivity to carbon emissions. Cherry Danish? No fiber or protein, or anything, really, but butter and sugar, so I'll be hungry again in an hour. The glowing vending machine lures me to its glassy façade, and it appears I've internalized those anthropomorphic Peanut M&Ms characters: "You're working so hard! Go ahead and indulge in this tasty treat. Candy makes you feel good!" I shove a dollar bill in the machine and the yellow package comes writhing down the glass. I do deserve these forbidden balls of high-fructose corn syrup goodness! I do! I return to my desk, and apple girl's look is one of undeniable disapproval and scorn. I should have never given in to that vending machine. I should have bought the banana. I vow to avoid those M&Ms for the foreseeable future, and to pack my own peanut butter sandwich for

some healthy late-night munching tomorrow evening.

Food choices, preferences, and habits are incredibly complex, and influenced by biological, social, and cultural factors. The way we eat is crucial to understanding our selves and our society, and food has long been a focus of sociological and anthropological inquiry in various capacities (Mintz & DuBois 2002). With this perspective on food, the simple midnight snack in the library mentioned above is not as trivial as it appears: a closer look at the agonizing choice of Peanut M&Ms, for example, reveals how concerns of environmental justice, popular nutritional discourse, media and advertisement, peer judgments, and a myriad of other factors influence a seemingly "simple" food choice.

As with nearly every aspect of American life, the internet is revolutionizing the way we eat. The increasing popularity of blogging (maintaining a "web log," a personal website updated sporadically by its author, the "blogger") has generated online forums for the discussion of many aspects of food, drink, cooking, dining, and eating. A particular niche of food blogs has emerged, devoted to the blogger's documentation of her food intake (the bloggers are overwhelmingly female). Daily posts consist of

prominent, eye-catching photos of meals and snacks alongside detailed text narration of the day; these bloggers create the story of their lives with food as the central, organizing structure. The self-proclaimed purpose of the “healthy living blogs” is not for the blogger to engage in or promote extreme weight loss or calorie restriction, but to serve as a place to document her commitment to leading a “healthy,” “balanced” life, and to connect with others with similar goals. And others are certainly interested and reading. A true community has emerged around these blogs. Although nearly all interaction is internet-based, bloggers form relationships with each other and with their readers, who frequently contribute to the conversation via the “Comments” section at the end of each post.

This philosophy of food as a means to health, life balance, and fulfillment is common across all 20 of the blogs analyzed in this study. Food is about more than a slim body for these women; although they certainly exhibit a concern for staying trim, eating “well,” according to their definition, is linked to a deeper sense of personal accomplishment and empowerment. These blogs reflect a larger, societal perception that consumption is indicative of one’s moral character – that how we eat truly reflects who we are (Griffin & Berry 2003:45, Madden & Chamberlain 2004:585). The online community that has assembled around these blogs exhibits a strong devotion to the goal of health. They are steadfastly united to embody their common values, and to attain the virtue and satisfaction of a “healthy” lifestyle.

This paper will interpret these healthy-living blogs as religious in nature. The virtual community of bloggers and readers unite and rally around the belief in “healthy,” “balanced” living, asserting the Durkheimian “unified system of belief” that lies at the foundation of collective religious behavior (Thompson 1982:129). The bloggers explicitly state these values online then enact them, in a Geertzian sense, through daily “ritual” practices. The language and images that the bloggers publish on their daily posts will be analyzed in order to uncover how food is understood and practiced in the lives of these women, and to demonstrate the religious character of their communal journey towards “health.”

With national obesity rates on the rise (CDC 2009) and a big-business food industry whose practices only exacerbate the problem, these bloggers appear to avoid this widespread American condition by staying consistently devoted to their pillars of nutrition and health. Delving into these blogs - these “extremely small matters,” (Geertz 1973:21) - offers perspective on the devotion and effort that are perhaps necessary to practice “good health” in this country. Furthermore, the public forum of the Internet has brought to light the typically “backstage” behaviors and emotions concerning everyday food consumption (Goffman 1956). The accessibility of the internet and the ability to blog – to connect and communicate with like-minded others throughout the nation and the world – has created and fostered the bloggers’ food-based religion and its surrounding

community. Through these healthy-living, this paper explores the burgeoning role of the internet in the personal negotiation of food choices and habits. Online activity has completely shaped and transformed the bloggers' relationship with and understanding of food, and this influence is not isolated. The overwhelming ubiquity of the internet in everyday life implicates that it does - and will increasingly continue to - affect the way we eat.

Discussion of Relevant Literature

No sociological or anthropological literature has been published regarding the specific blogs of this study, as these blogs are a recent and not particularly publicized phenomenon. However, the role of food in society has been exhaustively studied in the fields of sociology and anthropology. Food consumption patterns are driven by more than simple nutritional need (Mintz & DuBois 2002), and numerous theoretical frameworks have been created (and critiqued) to attempt to codify and understand the vital human act of eating, and its social implications (Wood 1995). This paper's analysis is based upon the general understanding that food choice and habits can communicate information about the consumer's social context and surrounding community (Wood 1995:14-23; Anderson 2005:109-139; Bourdieu 1984:ch. 3; Atkinson 1983). Especially important is the assertion that culturally-ascribed meanings and properties of food items themselves are thought to be transferred to the consumer when foods are eaten (Madden & Chamberlain 2004:584-586). Eating meat, for example,

can connote animalistic vitality, while a vegetarian diet can symbolize the consumer's purity (through eating "whole" foods) and compassion for living creatures (Twigg 1983:28-29). Foods hold various and changing social meanings and connotations: drinking milk, for example, brings to mind both the purity and innocence of a small child, and the strong, calcium-rich body of an athlete (Atkinson 1983:10-11). In the United States and throughout the West, advertisements play a key role in enforcing the virtues attributed to foods - qualities that can be embodied by the consumer if only they purchase and eat the product. Atkinson (1983) discusses how health food marketing in particular draws on the myth of the pastoral, "natural" "good life," luring customers to buy "farmhouse" bread or cheese that might transport them, too, back to the purity of the farm (15-16).

Madden and Chamberlain (2004) argue that especially as food choices are increasingly equated with physical health concerns such as obesity and heart disease, the pressure is high to avoid the "wrong" foods - foods that are culturally perceived as unhealthy or detrimental to the body (584-585). One who does "indulge" in M&Ms or French fries and subsequently exhibits an "unhealthy" (read: large) body is deemed irresponsible, lazy, lacking in self-control, and a moral failure (Madden & Chamberlain 2004:585). It is the personal responsibility, and even moral duty, of the individual to effectively control the quantity and quality of food intake. McGuire (1988) uncovered this belief in her study of alternative, holistic health practice among suburban, middle-class

Americans. These communities often considered health to be a truly spiritual or religious endeavor; living free of illness implied physical *and* moral accomplishment (McGuire 1988:247-249). The failure to achieve the “desired state defined as health” through personal control and discipline of behavior was considered “morally reprehensible” (McGuire 1988:249).

Griffin and Berry (2003) point to the transfer of Calvinist asceticism from the church to the world of capitalism as the reason why “consumption has come to be taken for granted as a morally correct ethos... a sense of social and moral standing come from what we consume and normative assumptions of what should be consumed” (45). Foods are thus deemed “good” or “bad” based on how they fit on the path towards health and, thus, morality (Madden & Chamberlain 2004:588-589). Advertisements especially exploit the notion that food choice dictates moral worth and frequently use religious rhetoric to do so: messages in food advertisement alternate between the call for restraint from “bad” foods, and the urge to indulge in the “sin” of forbidden ice cream bars or cheesecake (Griffin & Berry 2003; Madden & Chamberlain 2004:589). These advertisements suggest the serious implications of consuming any food product.

When cultural influences communicate that the choice between an apple and a package of Peanut M&Ms will determine one’s inner worth, an enormous amount of discipline, restraint, and self-control seem necessary at all times when interacting with food.

The steadfast pursuit of this “morality” of food is certainly represented in the healthy-living blogs of this study. The internet has emerged as a forum to discuss and negotiate conflicting, confusing messages conveyed in American society about health, food choices, and the ideal body type. Increased access to the internet has allowed individuals to project their opinions and identities through the fairly new medium of personal home pages and, more recently, blogs (Harp & Tremayne 2006:248; Stern 2007:160-161). Blogging is a means of narrating and, thus, making sense of one’s life, identity, and situation in society (Bell 2007:102; Somers & Gibson 1994:58-59). Blogs and internet participation also foster social bonds and the support of community without any face-to-face interaction (Rettberg 2008:60-61).

Literature concerning the role of the internet in food preferences and practices is relatively sparse. One online niche that has been the focus of recent sociological study is that of pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia (“pro-ana” and “pro-mia”) web sites and message boards. Contributors to these sites work to promote and encourage the self-discipline, control, and restraint necessary to achieve their unifying goal of the “thin body ideal” (Malson, 2009:357; Day & Keys 2008:7-8). The literature pertaining to these sites is most relevant in unpacking the sociological significance of online discourse of food consumption. The basic function of the pro-ana websites seems surprisingly similar to the food blogs’: to assert and perpetuate a common belief related to eating, and to

connect with others who share that belief (Day & Keys 2008, Malson 2009). Healthy-living blogs and pro-ana sites provide similar features (the ability to write about oneself or to respond to another contributor), and the users reflect a comparably regimented, methodical approach to food (Day & Keys 2008:6, 8). What is so interestingly different about these virtual spaces, though, is that the pro-ana sites are commonly viewed as deviant, disturbing, and undoubtedly *unhealthy*. The bloggers of this study, despite a similar preoccupation with food as demonstrated through the internet, are frequently considered to be pillars of health and, one could presume, morality.

Studying this new venue for the presentation of food practices fills a serious void in current literature concerning the role of the internet in constructing food-based identity and community. In the United States, being online has become as routine and habitual as gathering around the dinner table – in some cases, perhaps even more so. The healthy-living blogs of this study represent one of many ways that these two ubiquitous actions of everyday life – eating and internet use – intersect. The public nature of the internet, and particularly of blogs, has been widely studied (Harp & Tremayne 2006; Hevem 2004; Loft 2005; Rettberg 2008; Weber & Dixon 2007; Pauwels 2008). Investigation of these public virtual spaces as a means to understand current food practices, choice, and habits, and their societal implications, however, is largely absent in the existing literature.

Theory

The conception of food as a means to inner goodness and an enlightened life is prevalent in the blogs of this research. Bloggers and readers conflate certain food choices and habits with the larger motivation of “good health” – the sign of true personal achievement and worth. The bloggers’ daily behaviors are regimented, time-consuming, and driven by a common understanding that health is of utmost importance in life and existence – and that their behaviors are the means to achieve “good health.” In some ways, and with all due respect, the bloggers’ daily practices echo those of a Catholic who attends weekly confession, understanding this habit as a way to prove and enact her abstract belief in a loving and forgiving God. Similarly, a Jew who keeps a kosher kitchen practices these eating habits because he believes that following God’s law (as stated in biblical text) is the path to a religiously fulfilling life and, eventually, heaven. The healthy-living bloggers and formal religious believers share the perception of an inextricable link between collective, abstract, intangible belief and personal, active practices as a way to enact those beliefs. Although the bloggers do not physically unite for sporadic services or meetings – as followers of formal religion might – they use the internet to publicly affirm and discuss their beliefs and practices on a daily (or even thrice-daily) basis. These comparisons, however informal, suggest the typically religious intersection of strong belief and devoted practice within this cohesive community of bloggers. It should be noted that these bloggers do not comprise a subculture.

Their aspiration for health, and approaches to reach this goal, are rooted firmly in the mainstream; in fact, their behaviors and philosophy often echo popular health-related discourse and trends, such as support for local, organic foods and the USDA's food pyramid. Their behaviors, though embedded in the secular world, markedly embody the traits of a religion.

In this paper, the niche of the healthy-living blogs will be interpreted as religious in nature using two aspects of major sociological frameworks regarding religion: Emile Durkheim's conception of the church as a group with an explicit, unified system of common beliefs and values; and Clifford Geertz's emphasis on ritual acts as the way in which church members concretize and manifest these shared beliefs.

According to Durkheim, religion extends beyond the conventional conception of formal and organized religious practice (Giddens 1972:25). Rather, "religion is something eminently social"; the beliefs and practices of religion represent the "collective realities" of society itself (Thompson 1982:125). Religious practice or belief does not mandate a "God" to worship, a priest to preside over a service, or even a physical structure in which to gather (Giddens 1972:223). The virtual community surrounding these healthy-living blogs is certainly reflective of Durkheim's and Geertz's recognition of the religious nature of secular, social life. These theorists' work on the subject of religion is extensive; this paper will draw on and discuss only a small portion of

their theory in order to convey the religious nature of the blogs of study.

1. Durkheim: A Unified System of Beliefs

Emile Durkheim's definition of religion notes that the existence of "a unified system of beliefs" is the foundation for the creation of a group of religious adherents (Thompson 1982:129). Specific beliefs are not inherently religious, though; rather, Durkheim asserts that, "once a goal is pursued by a whole people, it acquires, as a result of this unanimous adherence, a sort of moral supremacy which raises it far above private goals and thereby gives it a religious character" (Giddens 1972:23). It is the collectivity of belief in shared "sentiments and ideas" (Giddens 1972:243) that intensifies their significance and imbues them with religiosity. The healthy-living blogs of this study publicly affirm the shared value of "good health"; the discrete ways in which they enact this overarching goal can be interpreted through the second aspect of theoretical framework:

2. Geertz: Ritual Practices as Models of and for Belief

Clifford Geertz, in his essay "Religion as a Cultural System" (1993), asserts that collectively practiced behaviors or actions ("rituals") are a means to concretize a devotion to abstract, intangible values (112). Carrying out a ritual action is a way to demonstrate religious beliefs to others: to use Twigg's (1983) example of vegetarianism, abstaining from eating meat is a public exhibition of the vegetarian's conviction that animal cruelty is immoral. Simultaneously,

though, Geertz explains that for the individual participant, religious ritual is an active step towards achieving the collective religious goal; rituals are “not only models of what they (the religious group) believe, but also models *for* the believing of it...men attain their faith as they portray it” (1993:114). In the performance of ritual, the system of belief is physically materialized and “the world as lived and the world imagined...become the same world” (Geertz 1993:112). The bloggers’ rituals include the meticulous preparation and consumption of meals, in addition to the reflection and discussion of their food choices through the act of updating the blog (“blogging”). The healthy-living bloggers’ active documentation of meals exhibits their belief system to an outside (online) viewer. At the same time, these ritual practices allow the bloggers to concretize and then perpetuate their values, allowing them to personally progress towards their wider goal of health.

This paper will prove that these healthy-living blogs do not just faintly echo the religiosity and moral implications often associated with food choices. Through the sociological lens of Durkheim and Geertz, the community surrounding these blogs functions as religious. Data analysis will demonstrate that:

1. The bloggers assert a “unified system of beliefs” pertaining to food and health.
2. Their eating habits, and the public commentary concerning those habits (the act of blogging), function as “rituals” that reinforce

and concretize the abstract goal of a “healthy” lifestyle and allow the bloggers to move towards that goal.

Methodology

The starting point for the study of these blogs was Kath Eats Real Food,¹ one of the most popular sites of this blogging niche. I investigated other healthy-living blogs through Kath’s “blogroll,” a feature wherein the blogger posts links to related blogs of interest. A list of 35 blogs was compiled (see Appendix 1, 2) that fit certain criteria: 1) the blog is updated nearly daily; 2) the purpose of the blog is to highlight a healthy, “normal” (in the blogger’s words) lifestyle, as opposed to attempts at extreme weight loss or dieting; 3) the blog records all meals of the blogger in a diary-style format, as opposed to sporadic recipes, or posts unrelated to food intake. This initial survey was meant to investigate the prevalence of these blogs, and supports the fact that this blogging is not an isolated activity, but that it is thriving - and growing. While some of the blogs have been maintained for over a year (Kath Eats Real Food recently celebrated its second anniversary), several bloggers of the sample specifically credited the inspiration of other healthy-living blogs for the more recent creation of their own blog. It should be noted that females authored 34 of the 35 blogs on this list, and that bloggers hail from all across the United States and Canada, as do readers who contributed comments.

¹ <http://katheats.com>.

From this master list of 35 blogs of similar structure and content, 20 were selected in order to study the “My Story” or “About Me” pages (see Appendix 1). These sections typically communicate the blogger’s general philosophy of food and health. The list was narrowed to 20 based on my assessment of which blogs best represented this community; for example, one blog, although it met the preliminary criteria, focused in much more detail on exercise habits than on food. This blog – and others similar to it – were eliminated when forming the list of 20. The singular blog authored by a male was also eliminated, but not on the basis of the blogger’s gender. Admittedly, this selection process involves some level of personal bias. However, I was confident in my ability to choose the blogs that would provide the most food-related content and, thus, the most analyzable data.

Data was collected from the “About Me” or similarly named sections of the 20 blogs, including all text and

photos in these sections (see Data Sources). The 20 blogs were then codified by the life stage of the blogger: college life (18-22, attending an undergraduate institution); early adulthood (20s and early 30s, living independently or with a significant other); and middle age (mid- to late-30s, usually married and or with children). The blogs were also codified by popularity, determined by the average number of user comments per post: low popularity (0 – 20 comments per post); middle popularity (20 – 40 comments per post); high popularity (40+ comments per post). High-popularity bloggers could be considered the pseudo-celebrities of this community. Corporations sometimes provide them with food items to review on the blog, or sponsor their attendance at nationwide blogging conferences because of their high site traffic. These high-popularity bloggers often make a small income from their blogging through advertisement and offers for freelance work.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of 20-Blog Sample

	Low Popularity (0-20 comments/post)	Middle Popularity (20-40 comments/ post)	High Popularity (40+ comments/post)
College Life (ages 18-22)	3	1	0
Early Adulthood (20s – early 30s)	4	4	5
Middle Age (late 30s+)	3	0	0

With these classifications, the list of 20 blogs was then narrowed to a representative sample of 8 (see Appendix 3). A smaller sample allowed for a more detailed analysis of blog posts, while still ensuring that the sample represented the themes and trends of the wider community. The blogs of the smaller sample were chosen to reflect the frequency of the demographic codifications of the sample of 20. Again, this introduced my personal selection

bias, but at this point in the research process I was following the 20 blogs almost daily, and had become familiar with the bloggers and their posting-style. Thus, I chose a sample that both fit the distribution of the original sample *and* reflected what I believed to be a diversity of perspective and voice. The majority of the blogs of this nature are authored by females in Early Adulthood, and the 8-blog sample reflects this fact.

Table 2. Demographic Breakdown of 8 Blogs Chosen for Detailed Analysis

	Low Popularity (0-20 comments/post)	Middle Popularity (20-40 comments/ post)	High Popularity (40+ comments/post)
College Life (ages 18-22)	NYCollegEats	K's Good Eats	–
Early Adulthood (20s – early 30s)	Danica's Daily	Healthy and Sane	Kath Eats Real Food Carrots 'n' Cake
Middle Age (late 30s+)	Running with a Recipe Krista's Kravings	–	–

Three days of blog posts were selected from each these 8 blogs, between the dates of 6 October 2009 and 13 October 2009 (see Data Sources). This range of dates was chosen for its “neutrality” from holiday vacations or feasts. The week-long window allowed for flexibility if the blog had not been recently updated for some reason, or if a post reflected a particularly out-of-the-

ordinary series of events. If the blog posts were consistent throughout the week, the three days with the most text and photo content were chosen. Again, this introduces my personal selection bias, but posts were chosen solely based on my perception of the quantity – as opposed to targeted quality – of data. 34 posts were chosen in all (see Data

Sources), as some bloggers post more than once a day.

The data collected from the selected posts included all text, photos, and user comments published on the selected dates. Drawing on Keats' (2009) methodology, an initial reading of the textual "About Me" data was conducted in order to become familiar with the context of each blog and to detect overarching themes and similarities. After the initial appraisal, a more specific reading was conducted to address these themes. During this second reading, data was codified into four subcategories that showed the daily "ritual" practices of the bloggers as enactments of their wider belief system: language used to explicitly indicate food as "good" or "bad"; language used to describe or reflect on indulgence; indications of control and agency; and mental/ emotional reactions to food intake.

Qualitative content analysis is an effective way to understand these bloggers' nuanced perspectives on food. The blog is a method of personal narration, and because these healthy-living bloggers are comfortable and open with their online community, the blogs are a space for an honest presentation of feelings, beliefs, and experiences, in addition to more objective information like food intake. The blogs are a lens through which to view the complex, usually private personal negotiation of eating and health. They demonstrate the ways in which food structures these women's lives, and the influence of online activity in their everyday practices. Close reading of the blogger-generated text allows for a deeper

exploration of the latent themes and similarities of these women's experiences than would the quantitative results of a survey or a similar, more wide-reaching method.

Research Limitations

The greatest limitation posed by this research is the homogeneity of the sampled bloggers. All were female, between the ages of 18 and 45, mostly Caucasian, and with socio-economic means that allowed for nutritious, fresh food on their plates on any given day. In terms of financial ability, this depiction of eating is far from the reality that many Americans face, but healthy-living blogs capturing a lower-income experience are essentially non-existent. Additionally, a male perspective was largely absent from these blogs, save the sporadic mention of a husband or boyfriend. This mirrors previous literature showing that men are more likely to generate "filter-type" blogs (those focused on news, politics, and the spreading of information) than women, who tend towards communicative, journal-type blogs like the ones of this study (Bell 2007:99-100; Harp & Tremayne 2006:250). Research exploring the pressure surrounding food choices for people of various social locations and backgrounds – and the role of the internet in those choices – would reveal whether the same implications of food appear across a wider spectrum.

Analysis of Data

An analysis of the textual content of these healthy-living blogs proves the blogging community to be a religious one, using the key aspects of Durkheim's and Geertz's definitions.

1. A Unified System of Beliefs

The bloggers of this online religion designate a specific section of their blogs to clearly and candidly state their core values concerning food and health. 20 blogs (see Appendix 2) were analyzed for this section of analysis to determine the “unified system of beliefs” (Thompson 1972:129) of the community. All 20 included mini-autobiographies of the bloggers (sections entitled “About Me,” “My Story,” “My Journey”), and all 20 mention, in varying levels of detail, the bloggers’ food attitudes or philosophy. These sections of the blogs function as explicit manifestation of the bloggers’ collective, guiding beliefs, as there is a great deal of overlap among these philosophies related to health. The bloggers reveal additional information about their beliefs throughout their daily posts, but this section of analysis will focus specifically on the About Me sections.

The overarching theme that emerges from the analysis is that of “balance.” 50% of the sample (n=20) specifically use the word “balance” in the About Me section, and 2 include the word in their blog’s subtitle (e.g. “Carrots ‘n’ Cake: A Blog Dedicated to Healthy Balance”). Even when bloggers did not explicitly use the word “balance,” the data addresses this overarching theme in three ways:

1.a. Balance of Diet: Indulging in Moderation

The most common food-related belief of the bloggers is that eating healthily does not entail restriction of any food, no matter its caloric value. The

attitude towards food consumption is overwhelmingly “anti-diet”; the bloggers understand dieting as an unsustainable means of food choice that “deprives” the eater of cravings and pleasures. The pattern of eating that the bloggers support and believe in is considered a “lifestyle” as opposed to the temporality of a “diet.” They believe in eating a balance of different food groups (to use the term so popularized in nutrition discourse), emphasizing “healthy” foods and only occasionally eating “bad,” “unhealthy” foods. 50% of the blogs explicitly state this belief by using the words “indulgence” “moderation” or “deprive.” There is a statement of faith that “it will all even out in the end” between healthy food and treats.¹ Jenn affirms that: “the occasional pigout or rich treat will (not) alter your entire weight loss diet or health for the duration of your life”.² The bloggers believe in indulging one’s cravings from time to time, and that a healthy lifestyle is liberating as opposed to limiting and oppressive, like dieting.

However, striking the balance between indulgence and eating “healthy” is complex and nuanced, and seems to require a great deal of vigilance. Many bloggers explicitly state which foods should be part of a daily diet in the About Me section. Foods mentioned as healthy and good include: vegetables; fresh produce; products that are natural, unprocessed, organic, free-range, “whole,” or local. Usually, though, the

¹ Eat Like Me. 1 October 2007. Let’s Take a Step Back and Review.

² Jenn’s Menu and Lifestyle Blog. About. <http://www.j3nn.net/about/>.

term “healthy food” is used without specification, as though the reader should immediately understand what this categorization entails. Bloggers are much more explicit in noting indulgence foods to avoid and eat in moderation: Snickers, pizza, full-fat ice cream, birthday cake, fast food, Little Debbie bars, “treats” or “dessert” in general, chocolate, candy, and French fries were all mentioned by name. Although the bloggers encourage the inclusion of all foods into one’s diet, they are more acutely aware and expressive of “bad” foods to be avoided. It is clear that striking the balance between different varieties of food is complex, and that the call to indulge is tempered by a wider cognizance of health:

If you love chocolate, sausages, ice cream, candy, French fries, wine/beer or something else less healthful then by all means have it and don’t deprive yourself. I do think we all should practice some form of restraint to best benefit our long-term health, as these “unhealthy” or “bad” foods...do not provide the body with...nutrients.³

If you want to lose weight once and for all, **commit** to a new lifestyle that includes a “diet” filled with healthy, nutritious foods 80% of the time, but allow yourself *controlled* portions of the “fun” foods for the remaining 20%. Don’t think you can’t splurge once in a while. Let yourself go crazy once a week, but in

moderation. (Emphasis present in the original)⁴

This philosophy of a delicate balance of eating that requires surveillance, mindfulness, and careful control is internalized throughout the blog community. It is manifest in the daily food choices of the bloggers, as demonstrated in the posts examined in section 2 of this paper’s analysis.

1.b. Balance of Food and Exercise: Calories In vs. Calories Out

Every blog in the sample acknowledges the necessity of physical activity in achieving a healthy lifestyle. Food consumption and exercise are seen as interdependent, and are often referred to as an inseparable entity (“Eating Healthy and Staying Fit”; “eating and exercise”). Biologically, maintaining an equal balance between calories consumed and calories burned ensures weight stability, and the bloggers recognize this reality. Although none of the bloggers are self-proclaimed “calorie counters,” comparing food intake to levels of physical activity is an accepted duty of daily life for nearly all the bloggers - especially because they believe in occasional indulgence in caloric treats. Maintaining the right balance ensures that one will “never feel deprived”⁵ because calories eaten will not exceed calories expended. Exercising more

³ Eat Like Me. 1 October 2007. Let’s Take a Step Back and Review.

⁴ Carrots ‘n’ Cake. Weight Loss. <http://carrotsncake.com/weight-loss>.

⁵ Kath Eats Real Food. Kath. <http://www.katheats.com/kath-2/>.

means that one can “afford” a little more “wiggle room” in caloric intake.⁶

Four bloggers point to exercise as the turning point in the “conversion” to a healthy lifestyle. These About Me sections narrated the bloggers’ transformations from, “a beer-guzzling, anti-gym college student”⁷ to a runner or spinning fanatic. 14 of the bloggers express a true enjoyment of exercise, even a “passion,” and associate happiness, positive self-esteem, and stress relief to physical activity.

The constant attention needed to maintain this balance can be taxing and difficult, though: Monica confesses, “I love running, but I also love eating and unfortunately I eat more than I burn.”⁸ Bloggers recommend pursuing a variety of exercise routines to avoid boredom, and acknowledge the difficulty of finding time to run or bike when working at a 9-to-5 desk job. Regardless, the blogging community believes in the virtue and necessity of exercise, and in monitoring and maintaining a balance between physical activity and food.

1.c. Balance of Life in General: Healthy Habits Impact Everything

The bloggers believe that combining healthy eating with regular exercise – maintaining these first two aspects of balance – influences much more than the shape of their bodies. Happiness, self-confidence, self-esteem,

⁶ Eat Like Me. 1 October 2007. Let’s Take a Step Back and Review.

⁷ Healthy Tipping Point. Tips. <http://www.healthytippingpoint.com/tips>.

⁸ Run, Eat, Repeat. About. http://runeatrepeat.com/?page_id=2.

and general well-being are all equated with “proper” health-related behaviors; these feelings are especially clear in the stories of the bloggers who have transformed previously-unhealthy eating habits and now claim to be reaping the physical *and* emotional benefits of their knack for balance. Elina states that, “I am fit, healthy and happy, and that’s what truly matters” as opposed to the number on her scale: “I’m much more in tune with what I want, physically and mentally.”⁹ After a long journey towards weight loss and health, Kath claims, “I feel radiant every day...I have never felt better about myself or been happier about where I am in life, and I believe it all stems from a boost in self confidence.”¹⁰ Clearly, the bloggers believe in the power of physical health to greatly influence their emotional well-being. How and what they eat extends beyond physical implications and affects the whole self. Similar to McGuire’s (1988) findings about suburban, middle-class practitioners of alternative healing, physical health for these bloggers also indicates moral, virtuous accomplishment, and they wholeheartedly believe in this correlation.

Many bloggers declare that balance in the personal spheres of food and health extend to wider aspects of their lives, which can be hectic and full of commitments to work, significant others, and children. The titles and self-proclaimed purposes of the blogs

⁹ Healthy and Sane. About. <http://healthyandsane.com/about/>.

¹⁰ Kath Eats Real Food. Kath. <http://www.katheats.com/kath-2/>.

indicate that a devotion to health provides structure for the bloggers' lives. Personal histories are narrated in terms of food habits and weight, and one blog (Healthy and Sane) is subtitled, "My Life in Food." Additionally, food-related metaphors are used in abundance: "I hope you enjoy the journey with me as I fulfill all of my life's cravings!"¹¹; "Running with a Recipe: Savoring the Ingredients of My Life." When it is clear that food is the critical, structuring aspect of life for these bloggers, the encompassing belief of the blogging community becomes present: that eating "right" and maintaining these forms of balance bring about general happiness, fulfillment, and a sense of inner virtue. Because the attainment of "health" is so linked to individual food practices, the bloggers believe that achieving this goal is always possible for the individual, if only she takes the initiative to make the correct choices.

No matter how long the work day or how tempting the cupcake, these bloggers prioritize their goals of balanced eating and exercise; they believe that these behaviors are the key to overall well-being and purpose, and that they are in control. Maintaining balance on so many levels does indeed require control, but the bloggers are encouraged and empowered to exhibit agency in their own lives:

With a free gym membership and a new outlook on life, I was finally able to take control of my weight...Today,

¹¹ Krista's Kravings. Krista – About Me. <http://www.blogger.com/profile/14597868827300760281>.

my focus is on healthy eating, wellness, fitness, and happiness.¹²

I was...very unhappy with the relationship I had with food and exercise, and I knew I was the only person who could change it.¹³

The bottom line is, you can be healthy if you want to. **Make the choice.** There's no secret. Move more, eat healthy. If you put your health first, weight loss comes naturally. (Emphasis present in original)¹⁴

It is clear from an analysis of About Me sections of these blogs that the bloggers indeed exhibit Durkheim's "unified system of beliefs." The bloggers are dedicated to the attainment of health as a constant negotiation of balance, and they assert their responsibility and capacity to "take control" and achieve these goals.

The following section of analysis results from a detailed reading of a sample of 8 blogs, chosen from the previous group of 20 (see Appendix 3). Three days of posting were selected from these blogs, resulting in an analysis of 34 total posts (some bloggers posted more than once a day). While a wider array of blogs was helpful in determining the overall principles and beliefs of this

¹² Carrots 'n' Cake. My Journey. <http://carrotsncake.com/weight-loss/my-journey>.

¹³ Healthy Tipping Point. Caitlin. <http://www.healthytippingpoint.com/about>.

¹⁴ Kath Eats Real Food. Kath. <http://www.katheats.com/kath-2/>.

community, closely investigating this smaller sample allowed for a deeper understanding of the day-to-day practices (“rituals”) of these bloggers.

2. *Ritual Practices as Models of and for Belief*

For the sake of this analysis, the “rituals” of the bloggers were defined as the meals and snacks that are documented daily on their blogs, in addition to the act of blogging itself – the generation of discussion and commentary regarding their own actions. Because food is the central organizing structure of these bloggers’ lives, the blogs are rife not only with photos and objective descriptions of what was eaten, but also with subjective commentary and reflections on these “rituals.” Analysis of the discourse surrounding food choices and habits shows that eating is indeed ritual for these women, in the Geertzian sense of the term. In publicly publishing their food habits online, the bloggers demonstrate their actions as a guide for the navigation of health (a model *of* belief). Additionally, the way that these women eat and reflect on their eating is an active means of embodying the self-professed goals and values of the About Me sections (a model *for* belief). The bloggers’ documentation of their rituals of everyday life concretizes and enacts their belief system of balance, and the internet is an indispensable tool in their ritual.

2.a. *Balance of Diet*

The bloggers commonly affirmed the need for balance between “healthy,” virtuous food and occasional indulgence foods in the About Me sections of their

blogs. Through daily food behaviors, the bloggers emphasize this value of balance by clearly demarcating “good” foods from “bad,” and discussing the ways that they navigate equilibrium between the two.

2.a.i. *“Good food”*

Analysis of the daily blog posts reveals both explicit and subtle ways that the bloggers denote what they believe to be “good” foods. There is often a concerted effort to highlight certain traits of a food product when it especially follows collective food preferences. Krista notes that her slice of banana bread is, “wholesome and homemade”¹⁵ and describes a photo as “a gorgeous, delicious, organic honey crisp apple”¹⁶. Ava deems Chobani yogurt to be “the ideal study fuel since it contains twice the protein of regular yogurt and tons of calcium”¹⁷. Foods that are extolled as “good” frequently possess inherent traits such as nutritional content and provenance (organic, from a Farmer’s Market, in season, etc.). And although “processed” foods are largely discouraged by the bloggers, certain characteristics can redeem them: “without added sugar”¹⁸ and “a short list of ingredients that are all pronouncable and recognizable,”¹⁹ for example. “Good” foods, though, are not only inherently nutritional – they are also assessed in

¹⁵ Krista’s Kravings. 6 October 2009. Dinner Pancakes.

¹⁶ Krista’s Kravings. 13 October 2009. Couch Potato.

¹⁷ NYCollegEats. 7 October 2009. Greek Yogurt Gods.

¹⁸ Running With a Recipe. 9 October 2009. Versatile Veggie.

¹⁹ NYCollegEats. 7 October 2009. Greek Yogurt Gods.

terms of the satiety they can deliver. The “best” foods in the eyes of the bloggers are nutritionally sound while also being, “Delish! And filling!”²⁰ The significance of satiety will be discussed further in the following section of analysis (2.b.i.).

Oatmeal stands out across the blogs as the epitome of a “good” food. 6 of the 8 bloggers ate oatmeal at least once during the three-day sampling period, and all take pride in their customizations of the stereotypically plain, boring food. Granola, nut butter, fruits, and infinite other toppings are added to the oatmeal in different variations each day, and recorded in painstaking detail. The blogs rarely include precise food measurements (even when the bloggers publish “recipes” they usually encourage approximation) but one’s morning oatmeal is frequently described in depth:

- 1/3 cup oats, milk, water, pinch salt
- 1 small banana
- 1 tbsp raisins
- ½ tbsp chia seeds
- 1/3 cup cooked wheatberries, stirred in at end
- Splash vanilla
- Sprinkle Mix My Granola
- A few toasty almonds
- Packet Barney Butter that didn’t come out of the packet as nicely as I had envisioned²¹

Although this exacting devotion to oatmeal is common across so many of the healthy-living blogs, Kath Eats Real Food sets the standard for the “worship” of oatmeal. Her site includes an entire tabbed section entitled “Tribute to Oatmeal,” dedicated to “the world’s greatest breakfast!”²² The section includes 123 high-quality, almost pornographically detailed photographs of various oats combinations, with links to the meticulous preparation directions to each, and an embedded video clip of her cooking technique.²³ This dedication towards the daily ritual of oatmeal proves it to be the pinnacle of “good” food – oatmeal is simultaneously nutritious, satiating, and tasty, and it allows for personal agency and control in its concoction.

2.a.ii. “Bad food”

By frequently including “good” foods in their daily meals and snacks, and by commenting on the virtues of these food products, the bloggers positively enact their abstract beliefs through ritual. According to the About Me data, “bad,” indulgent foods are also permitted for the bloggers’ - but only in specific manner that maintains acceptable balance. In the same way that eating and narrating a nutritious meal of “good” food is ritual for these bloggers, so is a day of eating that includes the “bad.” After all, the bloggers clearly communicate that they oppose restriction and dieting, and that “it will

²⁰ Carrots ‘n’ Cake. 10 October 2009. Errands to the Max.

²¹ Kath Eats Real Food. 6 October 2009. WBO.

²² Kath Eats Real Food. 19 February 2008. Tribute to Oatmeal.

²³ Ibid.

all even out in the end.”²⁴ Just as the bloggers’ comments and descriptions of “healthy” food manifest their system of beliefs, the discourse surrounding indulgence is equally part of the process of “attain(ing) their faith as they portray it” (Geertz 1993:114).

In some cases, the bloggers overtly address the fact that a food is “unhealthy” or “bad.” Regarding a restaurant’s jalapeño poppers, Danica states, “I am pretty sure there isn’t anything healthy about them, but, sometimes you just have to go for it!”²⁵ This acknowledgement, though, is usually accompanied by some statement of justification for eating the “bad” food, even if the treat seems to be innocuous and to fit in with an otherwise healthy diet. An after-dinner smear of Nutella is okay because its vehicle is whole-grain toast²⁶; frozen yogurt with sprinkles is allowed because it is only available at a certain faraway shop – “when in Rome, right!?”²⁷ This explicit admittance of “bad” eating clarifies the line between “good” and “bad” foods and denotes accepted reasons for indulgence in the “bad.”

It is more common, however, for the bloggers to narrate their indulgences or other deplorable food-related behaviors in more subtle ways. The unexpected player in this enactment of “bad” is the emoticon: the online version of the smiley face, formed by typing a colon adjacent to a close parenthesis :). 6

of the 8 blogs in this sample utilized the emoticon in conjunction with a “bad” eating habit. I came to interpret this playful, end-of-sentence smiley face to translate in layman’s terms to: “I know I really shouldn’t be doing this, but...I am.” The emoticon followed confessions of an extra sip of wine, a free cupcake sample, a few dips into the bowl of candy corn, a square of chocolate during class, and numerous other “indulgences.” Smiley faces were also used in conjunction with condemned practices regarding portion control: “I didn’t even bother with a plate! ;)”²⁸ The emoticon in itself truly functions as a micro-level representation of the bloggers’ ritual. It is a “model of belief” because it signifies a “bad” behavior to others. Simultaneously, the smiley allows the blogger to actively document a transgression, contemplate it in her striving for balance, and continue on the path toward “balance” and “health.” It is an enactment of the religious process – a “model for belief.”

2.a.iii. *The Best of Both Worlds*

The foods of highest veneration on these blogs, though, are at the convergence of the “good” and “bad” extremes. There is constant comparison of “healthy” foods to their indulgent counterparts. A “good” food that tastes like something more decadent and “bad” is valued and praised: squash roasted in the oven “tastes just like ‘fries’ this way”²⁹; “These bagels seriously reminded me of croissants”³⁰; a granola bar

²⁴ Eat Like Me. 1 October 2007. Let’s Take a Step Back and Review.

²⁵ Danica’s Daily. 17 October 2009. Rolly Polly.

²⁶ Healthy and Sane. 6 October 2009. Good Girl.

²⁷ K’s Good Eats. 13 October 2009. Welcome Back.

²⁸ Carrots ‘n’ Cake. 12 October 2009. Not a Happy Camper.

²⁹ Danica’s Daily. 17 October 2009. Rolly Polly.

³⁰ Krist’as Kravings. 6 October 2009. Dinner Pancakes.

“reminded me of a peanut butter chocolate chip oatmeal cookie.”³¹ Food products that are nutritionally virtuous *and* embody the taste qualities of indulgence are highly appreciated. Oatmeal often verges on the “bad,” which explains its esteemed status: with apples and vanilla yogurt, it transforms into apple crisp; with peanut butter and chocolate chips, a Reese’s cup; with banana and strawberry, a banana split. These foods are the most significant in the bloggers’ diets because they singlehandedly facilitate the maintenance of balance between good and bad: they are nutritious and “healthy” while simultaneously satisfying taste cravings for the “bad.”

A collective goal of these women is to strike balance between the realms of “good” and “bad” food. Accordingly, their ritual practice consists of the physical act of eating, but it also comprises monitoring, discussion, and commentary concerning which foods to extol and which to avoid. The bloggers’ ritual practices mark the separation between “good” and “bad” foods and demonstrate their navigation of these extremes. In posting their habits and thoughts online, the bloggers manifest their beliefs for others (a model *of* religion), and to progress through their own journey towards the higher goals of their religion (a model *for* religion).

2.b. Balance of Life in General

Two further tenets of the bloggers’ food-centered belief system are represented in their daily rituals: the power and agency of the individual to

control their own health; and the idea that food habits affect emotional, mental, *and* physical well-being. These ideas frame and explain the intense desire to maintain a balanced diet. Because the balance between “good” and “bad” influences nearly every aspect of the blogger’s life, serious control of the self and of outside situations is critical to consistently reach this balance. This is the essential underpinning of the bloggers’ conception of health, and it is demonstrated and enacted through their “ritual.”

2.b.i. Agency and Control

Eating, for the bloggers, is in some respects an extremely internalized and personal experience. Although they frequently share meals with spouses or friends and subsequently publish them online, the bloggers demonstrate that making “correct” food choices is possible in any context, so long as they are in control and responsible for their own desires and actions. There is a collective assertion among the bloggers that eating should only occur when one is truly hungry; eating out of boredom or sadness happens occasionally on the blogs, but these behaviors are acknowledged and chided more seriously than with the playful emoticon: “And I wish this was it. I was full and satisfied. Did I stop eating? Nope.”³² Consequently, satiety is a ubiquitous topic of discussion; each of the 8 bloggers in this sample discussed their “fullness” at least once a day (usually much more frequently) within the three days of post analysis.

³¹ K’s Good Eats. 9 October 2009. Replay.

³² Healthy and Sane. 13 October 2009. My Head is Getting to Me.

These bloggers “listen” to their hunger levels – they analyze them closely, and are aware of the best practices to “solve” a certain intensity of hunger or to maintain satiety over long periods of time. Specific combinations of oatmeal and toppings, for example, are praised as “delicious and tummy filling”³³ and “the perfect pre-run fuel.”³⁴ One afternoon, Kath states that, “I can’t believe I wasn’t hungrier (at 2:00PM] but whenever I have coffee mid-morning I’m less hungry for lunch.”³⁵ This constant awareness and monitoring of hunger levels often informs eating decisions. If breakfast was surprisingly filling, the blogger chooses a smaller lunch; if preparing dinner will take half an hour, the blogger eats a snack that she knows will perform well in the given situation. Asserting control begins for the bloggers with a sharp cognizance of their own bodies, and continues with the invention of the perfect “antidote” to hunger. The bloggers state their firm belief in the power of the responsible individual to make positive food-related changes in the About Me section, and their preoccupation with satiety is a fundamental enactment of this belief.

Beyond individual, bodily cues for eating, the bloggers’ food habits are also structured around external factors of life: work, children, spouses, and other obligations. In order to skirt these impediments to eating how they want and when they want, the bloggers exhibit

³³ Running With a Recipe. 7 October 2009. Not a Day Goes By.

³⁴ NYCollegEats. 7 October 2009. Greek Yogurt Gods.

³⁵ Kath Eats Real Food. 13 October 2009. Fun Run + Sun.

a considerable amount of effort to plan ahead. Meals are often packed from home to avoid inadequate food offerings in offices, airports, school cafeterias, or on the road. Kath devotes an entire post (13 photos) to document a day’s lunch, snacks, and dinner, packed on her kitchen counter for a lengthy evening of nutrition courses: “a good example of me eating on the go!”³⁶ When the bloggers’ food intentions are thwarted, as Tina’s were during an unexpected 10-hour visit to the dentist, they are “cranky! 😡” (picture is an angry devil-emoticon).³⁷ These practices of self-surveillance and extensive planning not only manifest and enact the bloggers’ system of beliefs; they also serve as a means to assert control in an overwhelming, chaotic world. In this way, the bloggers’ rituals function similarly to those of the suburban holistic health groups of McGuire’s (1988) research. These groups practiced yoga, meditation, and alternative medicine during times of illness to exhibit their personal power and control during frightening circumstances (McGuire 1988:229). The bloggers’ consistent health-related habits and practices are similarly empowering and grounding.

2.b.ii. Mental and Emotional Impact of Eating

Food clearly structures the lives of the bloggers: the narration of their days is based on the retelling of meals; they devote extensive energy and effort to

³⁶ Kath Eats Real Food. 7 October 2009. Prepped, Packed, Cleaned.

³⁷ Carrots ‘n’ Cake. 12 October 2009. Not a Happy Camper.

fulfilling their belief of “healthy” eating; most importantly, they take the time to broadcast these habits and feelings in an online public forum. The ritual practice of blogging attests to the bloggers’ most intangible food belief that “good” eating brings about a good, happy, fulfilling life – and proves the eater to be inherently good herself.

In analyzing the textual data, it is clear that food plays a significant role in the bloggers’ feeling of overall well-being. Food has the power to alter moods: oatmeal is rejuvenating on a cold morning, and a new package of Greek yogurt can brighten an otherwise “dismal” day³⁸. Conversely, feeling like one has overindulged or made the wrong choices can be depressing and even debilitating. Just as the characteristics of the warm, comforting, wholesome bowl of oatmeal seem transferred to the blogger upon consumption, the same can be said for “bad” foods. The effect of “bad” food is perhaps even heightened for the bloggers because (as discussed in section 2.a.) they have such an acute awareness of what ought to be eaten in moderation. Additionally (as discussed in section 2.b.i.) the bloggers feel an enormous sense of personal accountability for their food-related choices. Overindulgence does not simply hold physical implications of weight gain; a food-related falter is a failure of the blogger to assert her control and fulfill her personal obligation to be healthy. The blogger has transgressed a tenet of her religion, and the discourse in the posts of this analysis proves this. For

³⁸ NYCollegEats. 7 October 2009. Greek Yogurt Gods.

Tina, consuming too many beers and tailgate snacks taints her memory of an otherwise enjoyable day with friends.³⁹ Danica feels, “like a roly polly – so full and sorta greased out” after eating rich steaks and dessert at a restaurant.⁴⁰ Elina perhaps expresses these feelings most overtly:

I’ve been feeling kind of down for the past few days *because of my snacking*, so today when the urge to buy a cookie hit, I ignored it. Typically I’m a proponent of actually satisfying my cravings...but when it gets out of control, I need to ‘detox’ a bit with cleaner eats and more nutritious foods. It’s all about balance! As you’ll see below, I wasn’t eating carrot sticks all day – my food was still satisfying, mentally and physically.⁴¹

Food truly affects all aspects of these bloggers’ lives. They expressed this sentiment hypothetically in the About Me sections of the blogs, and they embody it through their daily eating/blogging ritual actions. The incredible power that the bloggers have ascribed to food – as a means to happiness, fulfillment, and personal success and worth – impels their devotion to balance the “good” and “bad” through self-control. The practices are so reliably and meticulously carried out because the bloggers believe them to be inextricably linked to something larger. Like so many religious followers, the bloggers truly have faith in the greater ramifications of their everyday actions. It

³⁹ Carrots ‘n’ Cake. 11 October 2009. Chili + Football.

⁴⁰ Danica’s Daily. 17 October 2009. Rolly Polly.

⁴¹ Healthy and Sane. 6 October 2009. Good Girl.

is this ethereal relationship between practice and belief that proves this group as religious.

Conclusion

When first introduced to these blogs, some readers might be taken aback: the diligent dietary updates, extensive photography, and scrutinizing self-commentary and policing appear to be compulsive and bizarre behaviors. Why do these people think we care about what they eat? Where do they find the time to do all this? Most importantly, why are they so *obsessed* with food? In many ways, the new reader is correctly appraising the situation; as the blogs posts show, these women demonstrate a visibly dogged devotion to specific eating habits. However, textual analysis of the blogs illustrates the logical reasoning behind these practices: the bloggers steadfastly perform their “rituals” because they sincerely believe the practices will lead to the venerated condition of “health.” Being healthy connotes personal achievement, righteousness, and value of the self. Understanding this overarching, collective belief shows the bloggers’ daily practices (extensive tinkering with oatmeal; pursuit of organic produce; or a guilt-infused emoticon, for example) as completely valid within their ideological, religious context. The bloggers’ faith in the posited outcome of their rituals, coupled with their devotion to maintain the practices necessary to the definitive goodness of health, proves them to indeed be religious through the theoretical definitions given by Durkheim and Geertz. Additionally, without the online medium of blogging,

these women’s religion could not be publicly shared or perpetuated. The religion would cease to exist, as would the structuring rituals of the bloggers’ everyday lives. The ability to blog has undoubtedly impacted these women’s experience of eating, a fundamental practice of physical and social life. Concurrently, their blogging allows for an unprecedented opportunity to explore the nuances of food-related behavior and philosophy.

Discussion

Because of the demographic make-up of their authors, these blogs could easily be dismissed as self-indulgent excuses for privileged women to flaunt their food preferences. But to combat this interpretation, I return to the scenario presented at the opening of this paper involving the midnight Peanut M&Ms in the library. Although that situation is dramatized, the daily decisions we make concerning food are complex and often daunting. In the United States, consumers are constantly bombarded with the cultural messages of advertisement encouraging them to eat a certain way; with promises to “lose weight quick” endorsed by rail-thin or muscle-man celebrities; with the notion that eating “how you’re supposed to” produces a good person, while everyone else is a fat, irresponsible failure. The bloggers’ monitoring and close documentation of their food intake, then, is not unreasonable. If food choice is accepted as indicative of one’s moral, personal worth and identity, it deserves the time, energy, attention, and care that the bloggers demonstrate. And the internalization of the deep moral

implications of food consumption does not simply affect the women of these blogs. After all, “you are what you eat” is a ubiquitous adage throughout the United States, and that rhetoric is used throughout public and personal discourse.

In his recent New York Times article “Rules to Eat By,” acclaimed food writer Michael Pollan (2009) addressed the question plaguing the bloggers and so many Americans: “If we can’t rely on the marketers or the government or even the nutritionists to guide us through the supermarket woods, then who can we rely on?” Continually escalating national obesity rates prove that current societal food messages are far from curative (CDC 2009). Pollan (2009) suggests that navigating the treacherous task of eating right mandates a reliance on others we know and trust: “an informal, unsanctioned way of negotiating our eating lives that becomes indispensable at a time when official modes of talking about food have suffered a serious loss of credibility.” I would argue that this is the function of the healthy-living blogs. In a food climate where the stakes seem high (“Do you even know what non-organic produce does to your/your child’s/your spouse’s body?”) and conflicting paths to “health” battle for our attention and our dollars, the bloggers hold fast to their religious beliefs and practices, using the internet as their essential tool. Geertz (1993) further explains a purpose of religion in his essay *Religion as a Cultural System*:

Bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox are all...radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can...orient ourselves effectively within it – challenges which any religion, however “primitive,” which hopes to persist must attempt somehow to cope. (100)

Religion is a source of solace and order in the face of chaos and uncertainty. Through the public, collective assertion of their food-related beliefs, and unwavering practices that enact and embody these values, the bloggers rally around their religion of health. In making the private negotiation of eating public and communal, the bloggers answer Pollan’s (2009) call for “informal” eating commandments. The blogs of this study provide a model for this necessary food-based support network. Through their religion of health, the bloggers effectively maintain their beliefs through communal, online assertion and encouragement of accepted practices. The fundamental traits of their community could inform nutrition initiatives in any social circumstance. These healthy-living blogs demonstrate the deep entrenchment of the internet in everyday life and, concurrently, its power to religiously unite any community to declare their beliefs, give meaning to their experiences, and attain their goals – even if that goal is simply to resist the beckoning glow of the vending machine.

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Running With a Recipe. (2009, October 13). Warm by the Oven. Message posted

to <http://runningwitharecipe.blogspot.com/2009/10/warm-by-oven.html>.

Running With a Recipe. Why I Do This. Message posted to <http://runningwitharecipe.blogspot.com/>

SnackFace. About. Message posted to <http://snackface.wordpress.com/about/>.

The Chic Life. About. Message posted to <http://thechiclifetypepad.com/about.html>.

Appendix

1) 20 Blogs Included in "About Me" Analysis:

<http://carrotsncake.com/> (Carrots 'n' Cake)

<http://collegaleats.blogspot.com/> (NY Collegeats)

<http://danicasdaily.com/> (Danica's Daily)
<http://eatdrinkandbeaware.blogspot.com/>
(Eat, Drink, & Be Aware)

<http://eatingbender.com/> (Eating Bender)

<http://eatingbirdfood.com/> (Eating Bird Food)

<http://eatliverun.com/> (Eat, Live, Run)

<http://graduatemeghann.com/> (The Inner Workings of a College Graduate)

<http://hangrypants.com/> (HangryPants)

<http://healthyandsane.com/> (Healthy and Sane)

<http://healthytippingpoint.com/>
(Healthy Tipping Point)

<http://www.j3nn.net/> (Jenn's Menu & Lifestyle Blog)

<http://www.katheats.com> (Kath Eats Real Food)

<http://kristaskravings.blogspot.com/>
(Krista's Kravings)

<http://ksgoodeats.wordpress.com/> (K's Good Eats)

<http://runeatrepeat.com/> (Run, Eat, Repeat)

<http://runningwitharecipe.blogspot.com/>
(Running With a Recipe)

<http://www.self.com/fooddiet/blogs/eatlikekeme> (Eat Like Me)

<http://snackface.wordpress.com/>
(SnackFace)

<http://thechiclifetypepad.com/> (The Chic Life)

2) 15 Blogs Omitted from Initial List for Analysis:

<http://actorsdiet.blogspot.com/> (The Actors' Diet)

<http://applecrumbles.com/> (Apple Crumbles)

<http://blueberryhil.wordpress.com/> (Blueberry Hill)

<http://burpandslurp.wordpress.com/> (Burp and Slurp)

<http://caretoeat.net/> (Care To Eat)

<http://foodmakesfunfuel.com/> (Food Makes Fun Fuel)

<http://happyherbivore.com/about/> (Happy Herbivore)

<http://healthyashley.blogspot.com/> (Healthy Ashley)

<http://heathereatsalmondbutter.com/> (Heather Eats Almond Butter)

<http://www.honormyhealth.com/> (Honor My Health)

<http://lengslog.wordpress.com/> (A Fat Cat and a Vegetarian)

<http://luckytastebuds.wordpress.com/> (Lucky Taste Buds)

<http://www.melissanibbles.com/> (Melissa Nibbles)

<http://onalobsterplacemat.com/> (On a Lobster Placemat)

<http://pastriesandbacon.wordpress.com/> (Pastries & Bacon)

3) 8 Blogs Included in Daily Post Analysis:

<http://carrotsncake.com/> (Carrots 'n' Cake)

<http://collegaeats.blogspot.com/> (NY Collegeats)

<http://danicasdaily.com/> (Danica's Daily)

<http://healthyandsane.com/> (Healthy and Sane)

<http://www.katheats.com> (Kath Eats Real Food)

<http://kristaskravings.blogspot.com/> (Krista's Kravings)

<http://ksgoodeats.wordpress.com/> (K's Good Eats)

<http://runningwitharecipe.blogspot.com/> (Running With a Recipe)

4) Healthy and Sane. About Me. Message posted to <http://healthyandsane.com/about/>.



5) Kath Eats Real Food. (2009, February 3). Tangerine Sunshine. Message posted to <http://www.katheats.com/?p=15272>.



6) Danica's Daily. (2009, October 12). Role Reversal. Message posted to <http://danicasdaily.com/role-reversal/>.



