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## FASHION BLOGGING

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blogs, brand, digital, fashion, luxury

### Introduction

For a long time fashion has had a mixed reputation as a research topic. On the one hand, researchers have often considered fashion too “frivolous” to provide serious ground for scientific analysis (Barnard 2007a; Godart 2009). But, on the other hand, fashion has increasingly grown as a serious business engaging substantial investment and returning considerable profits in ever growing markets.

According to Euromonitor International, however, global consumer expenditures for “fashion” (an aggregation of “clothing and footwear” and “jewellery, silverware, watches and clocks, travel goods”) amounted to US\$2 trillion, which is more than the US\$1.2 trillion spent on the purchase of cars, motorcycles and other vehicles. Besides, fashion plays an essential role in identity construction (Arnold 2001; Davis 1992; Entwistle 2000), including consumer identity (Jackson and Shaw 2006), and contributes to shaping consumer culture (Jackson and Shaw 2006; McCracken 1986; Thompson and Haytko 1997). In a global context where consumers buy more and more fashion goods,<sup>1</sup> a better understanding of how and why consumers make use of fashion products is highly relevant for marketers and consumer researchers.

While fashion *per se* has attracted increased attention from scholars in the realm of cultural studies (Barnard 2007b; Bruzzi and Gibson 2006; Crane 2000; McCracken 1986; Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997), fashion mediated through social media and specifically through weblogs, has been only partially addressed. With the rise of online communities, and specifically of blogs, branded discussions and word of mouth have dramatically changed (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Kozinets 2006; Kozinets *et al.* 2010). In particular, consumers have gained greater control over brand narratives by sharing and evaluating their consumption experiences through products and brands. Existing research has examined the consequences of new networked narratives within the so-called blogosphere (Kozinets *et al.* 2010) but only very few scholars have studied fashion blogs and blogging. And, yet, a better understanding of fashion blogging and its influence on consumer culture and audiences is important.

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Fashion blogs report extensive brand and product experiences including self-fashioning through outfits, information sharing and tips about fashion brands and products (Kretz 2010; Zhao and Belk 2007). Recent studies have shown that consumers trust blogs more than they trust mainstream media as a source of information. In addition, blogs influence their audience: they generate recommendations and purchases: more than 40 percent of the respondents declared they would recommend a brand or a product and that they would purchase it from blogs as an information source.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, fashion blogs, beyond cultivating consumerism through the cultivation of desire for fashion goods (Zhao and Belk 2007), may well act as a new channel for brand and product promotion. As a consequence, greater understanding of fashion blogging and of blogs' influence regarding consumer culture may suggest new marketing techniques using blogs as recommendation and influence media.

In the present chapter, we report bloggers' motivations to blog and particularly their search for popularity. Existing research on blogging is quite substantial but is scarce on fashion blogging. We review themes that have already been addressed regarding fashion-themed blogs and try and highlight what makes fashion-themed blogs special, compared to other kinds of blogs. Fashion blogs differ from other blogs along two main dimensions: (1) identity hyper-representation; and (2) hyper-connection with the community. Specifically, fashion blogging has introduced new ways of considering identity, representations of beauty and style, and professional and social success. It has also redefined the relationships between brands and consumers and brand advocacy. Finally, we suggest a research agenda for fashion blogging taking into account the growing impact of social network integration.

### **Fashion blogging motivations**

Political and communication studies have already thoroughly analyzed bloggers' motivations to have a news or politics blog. Above all, bloggers have been reported to blog for popularity (da Cunha Recuero 2008). Some bloggers blog for social reasons while others do so for professional reasons (Marlow 2006). In other words, professional bloggers use their blogs to somehow make money while social bloggers seek interactions with their readers to create communal exchanges. Nardi *et al.* (2004) investigated the reasons why people blog and discovered five main reasons: (1) to document their lives, that is, to inform and update readers about their activities; (2) to provide commentary and opinions about topics they are passionate about; (3) to express emotions and make use of the blog as a catharsis; (4) to write and articulate ideas they would not have been able to develop without a blog and to commit to a discipline of regular writing; and (5) to create and maintain interactions within community forums. Schau and Gilly (2003) have already demonstrated that people who have a personal web page manage self-impression and seek "personal growth" and "advocacy" (*ibid.*, p. 391). As a consequence, bloggers may maintain a blog for the sake of identity construction and for communal and commercial reasons. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) added that bloggers write to share with the community branded information through networked word of mouth. In that respect, blogging consists in entertaining both relationships with brands and marketers while engaging in a communal activity.

Style and fashion bloggers blog for identity construction: they often want to construct characters (Kretz 2010), play with identities through "self-fashioning" (Zhao and Belk 2007) and enact individual (Chittenden 2010) and social selves (Palgrem 2010; Pham 2011) in their blogs. Existing findings about blogging suggest that bloggers may also blog for communal and commercial reasons. We collected data through 20 in-depth interviews with fashion bloggers in order to establish style and fashion blog authors' motivations to start a blog (Kretz 2011). We discovered that, indeed, style and fashion bloggers most of the time started to blog for communal reasons

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and particularly to do the following: overcome the frustration that no one in their close surroundings understood their passion for fashion; make friends who share the same passion for fashion and exchange with them; and share tips, recommendations and bargains regarding fashion products. Also, style and fashion bloggers sometimes started a blog for professional motives and specifically to commit to a regular authoring occupation while temporarily unemployed or idle to overcome boredom in their lives, and to display professional competence through authoring performances. What seems to be more specific to fashion-themed blogs is the bloggers' commercial motivations to blog. In particular, style and fashion bloggers said they want to attract brands' attention in order to receive gifts and invitations from brands and monetize their blog through advertisement or sponsored posts (*ibid.*), and to develop relationships and partnerships with them. In fact, brand representatives and advertising agencies do browse the fashion blogosphere to highlight potential brand advocates and promoters. Therefore, style and fashion bloggers often strive to attract their favorite brands' attention in order to receive gifts and money through blog monetization but also to develop relationships and partnerships with them. Indeed, brands often invite bloggers to special events or visits, to train them in the brand's history, values and craftsmanship. Because brands give carefully selected bloggers access to unique and unseen information, the blog content of those bloggers becomes outstanding and valuable in the eyes of their audience.

Fashion bloggers, however, do not strictly and exclusively blog for themselves, to please an audience of readers or to please potential employers or partner or sponsor brands. We have discovered a blogging psychology that is much more complex, where fashion bloggers usually aim for popularity in their community and, if possible, outside it. In other words, whether they blog to make friends and generate a community of expression about fashion, or to make a living out of their blog, style and fashion bloggers most of the time admit they are caught in the game of popularity and are really happy to see the number of visitors and comments increase on their blog. First, because it satisfies a kind of narcissistic contentment and feeling of usefulness to be read, followed and encouraged to write. Second, because the rise in incoming links to the blog mechanically increases the blog's audience, *i.e.* popularity online, which in turn increases the probability that new readers and potential employers or partner brands will identify the blog. Generally speaking, bloggers dream of popularity as a reward for their hard blogging work. Popularity is thus quite a general motivation for fashion bloggers.

Fashion bloggers are not always looking for the same kind of popularity. Some may look for a certain visibility within a specific community of readers and for interactions with similar people and peer bloggers, thus displaying prevalent communal popularity motivations. Instead, some others might want to become known to brands and agencies for their skills in the fashion field (photography, design, illustration, styling, content production) and use their blog as a springboard to make a living through advertisement or freelance contracts with fashion brands. They thus show more prevalent professional and commercial popularity motivations. Yet, fashion bloggers do not exclusively seek one kind of popularity, *i.e.* communal or professional/commercial. They just tend more to one of those options while always keeping in mind that they need to satisfy their readers who are the major providers of the audience for a blog.

### **The hyper-representation of identity**

Arsel and Zhao (Chapter 5 in this volume) discuss blogs as a stage for identity performance. In fashion blogs, identity performance is exacerbated as compared to other kinds of blogs as a way to offer representations of ideal style and beauty.

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### *Personal interpretation of ideal style and beauty*

Fashion blogs mainly feature visuals (photographs and sometimes illustrations) and little text (Kretz and De Valck 2010b). Photographs either stage the blogger in carefully selected outfits (Zhao and Belk 2007) and striking carefully studied poses, or everyday models encountered in the street. Most of the time, fashion bloggers make their own photographs, serve as models, visually self-disclose through those pictures, and arrange a *mise-en-scène* mimicking the fashion and luxury ad campaigns they like (Kretz 2010). Alternatively, some popular fashion blogs present pictures of everyday people who have accidentally served as models because the blogger thought their outfit was worth sharing with the community for its originality and creativity. As would style managers in fashion magazines, they suggest inspirations and style models to follow. This kind of picture is also known as “streetstyling.” Over time, the number and the quality of the pictures taken and presented in fashion blogs have dramatically improved: bloggers who were their own model have sophisticated their outfits, poses and the setting of the pictures; streetstyle bloggers have hired models and borrowed fashion clothes and accessories and arranged fashion shoots to produce professional quality pictures. Generally speaking, enhancing the pictures’ aesthetic appeal through Photoshop has become the usual practice. Fashion blogging has progressively introduced idealized representations of what beauty and style should be through the eyes of everyday fashion consumers. In the same way that journalists have created a fashion discourse and taught the bourgeoisie how to dress through the description of models in fashion shows, fashion bloggers co-produce their personal vision of what beauty and style should be with an audience of readers who react and interact regarding the outfits presented.

Interestingly, though, whereas fashion bloggers imitate fashion designers and stylists’ practices in the way they represent identity, on blogs the blogger’s personal and amateur touch still remains, even in the ones targeting the most sophistication. This is mainly due to the fact that readers expect authenticity and genuineness from their favorite bloggers. In other words, even if the audience really appreciates inspiring outfits and breathtaking artistic direction from the bloggers, they above all value the bloggers’ personal vision and the authenticity of the content produced. For that reason, fashion bloggers who have modeled on their own blog have progressively self-disclosed and abandoned anonymity. When fashion blogs started, model bloggers used to hide their faces, but they now self-stage and exaggerate their features and personality in the pictures they present. Indeed, their readership increases when bloggers self-disclose because people like it better when they can identify, self-compare and update their lives with their favorite blogger.

### *Personal branding*

Along with the decline of anonymity in favor of disclosed identity, bloggers have increasingly committed to personal branding in their blogs. At first, fashion bloggers would choose a name they thought would describe best who they were and their aspiration in blogging. Blog layout and visual identity were quite rough. In a period of five years, fashion blogs have dramatically improved visually and become much more professional. Bloggers manage their blog as a personal brand where the blog’s name equals a brand’s name; the header banner equals a logo; the signature equals a claim; the blog’s visual identity equals a product’s packaging; the content promotes a certain personality through a certain tone and plot; and the brands mentioned construct a digital extended self (Kretz and De Valck 2010a). Fashion blogs have now achieved differentiated and recognized identities and associations with their names.

However, similar to commercial brands, awareness is not enough to fully succeed. Bloggers as personal brands have recently started to adopt audience (popularity) management strategies.

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Specifically, they have extended their reach and frequency to recruit more readers and maintain their visibility by linking their blog to social networking websites like Twitter, Facebook, Lookbook, and by appearing in the mass media (in the fashion press, on TV shows) while publishing content at a fast and regular pace. As compared to other kinds of blogs, fashion blogs extensively combine the use of other loci of discussion and interaction with the use of their blog to achieve personal branding objectives. And, as compared to other kinds of blogs, many more fashion bloggers have gained professional and/or social recognition via their blog. Overall, personal branding in fashion is witnessing a new way of contemplating celebrity or professional success: anyone can live a “rags-to-riches” story, provided they know how to self-brand.

### *Constructing stereotypes through brands*

Fashion bloggers present an extension of their sense of self in the real life in their blog. They also use this space as a way to create imagined characters (Kretz 2010) or to project identities in accordance with the surrounding consumerist values and fashion of the times (Zhao and Belk 2007). In particular, they arrange storytelling, including plots featuring brands and products (Kretz and De Valck 2010a), and dramatize their lives by exaggerating elements of their real life and mixing them with fiction to nurture the character they want to construct, to please their audience's need for entertainment and life upgrade. Specifically, consumption narratives contribute to further construct the blogger's identity in the eyes of the audience and to generate empathy and a sense of similarity and connivance because both the author and the readers share the same tastes. This sense of similarity and connivance permits the growing influence and recommendation power between the blogger and their loyal audience. As a consequence, fashion bloggers tend to include a set of recurring brands and products that readers associate with the blogger's identity and personality and that the readers also like. Some brands and products thus contribute to create stereotype blogger identities such as the luxury brand expert, the designer brand addict, or the mass fashion victim. At that point, bloggers are expected not to leave the territory of brand expression that they committed themselves to in the beginning: readers would experience that as a betrayal. For example, if a blogger is used to promoting designers' brands and goes luxury or mass fashion, loyal readers who follow him or her may not appreciate this new editorial line. The fundamentals of the relationship constructed in time between the blogger and the readers represent a specific asset in fashion blogs, which we will discuss later.

### **Hyper-connection with the community**

Most of the present active fashion blogs started as a way to exchange ideas about fashion, brands and purchases and to make connections with people who shared the same passion for fashion and luxury consumption. Communal relationships therefore have underpinned fashion blogging from its very beginning.

Bloggers and readers have built close interactions in time through reading, commenting and answering or linking. Blogs introduced the commenting feature in personal spaces, thus allowing discussion on fashion topics raised by blog posts. Comments in turn have made it possible for people to highlight common interests, similarities, shared tastes and thus to create more or less strong bonds between readers and bloggers but also between readers or between bloggers who read each other. This has triggered linking phenomena where bloggers have mentioned other bloggers they liked in their own blog or where readers linked the posts they liked via their own personal pages (in general social network pages like Facebook or Twitter). Incoming links and visits largely contribute to a blog's popularity and such communal popularity makes up a blog's

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value. As a consequence, bloggers need to maintain communal relationships to preserve their blog's value. Hyper-connection with the community is both a consequence of the initial motivation to make connections with new people and to share content, but also part of the motivation to remain popular and visible within the crowd of fashion blogs.

What is more specific to fashion blogs in hyper-connecting with the community is: (1) the recommendation power of authors generated by communal links, combined with (2) the management of scarce resources both for the bloggers and the brands.

### *Recommendation power of authors*

Sharing a common interest and taste for specific products and brands creates strong links between bloggers and readers. Specifically, similarity and shared taste create trust relationships between the readers and the blogger: readers feel they can identify with their favorite blogger and trust them as a fashion and style adviser. Time helps create the implicit agreement between the blogger and the readers that the author will follow the same editorial line, that is, remain fresh, not be commercial, and will present brands and products that are expected to fit with the blogger's identity that is constructed and associated with that blogger in the consumers' minds. Such a trust relationship is an asset bloggers construct in the long run, and that guarantees a fashion blogger's influence within a community. Fashion and luxury brands, indeed, actively look for advocates online. For a long time, brands were hesitant to enter the web, as it was feared as a way to let brand discourse control fall into the hands of consumers. Brand managers, however, have found the use of identified advocates to be a reassuring way to take the first steps online to address targeted segments. Specifically, the main advantage offered by bloggers identified by brands as potential advocates is the quality of the relationship entertained with the audience. Since readers like the blogger, trust them, identify with them and share common tastes and interests, relevant brands increase the probability of improving consumers' awareness and chance of purchase in promoting their product through relevant bloggers.

The question then arises of which brand is relevant for which blogger. In traditional marketing, advocacy or celebrity endorsement usually requires a certain "fit" between the promoting brand's values and image and the endorser (Kapferer 2008; McCracken 1989). The fit between a blogger and a brand comes from the commonalities of identity, image and values between the brand and the blogger as the personal brand that brand representatives value. In a social media marketing context, where everyday consumers use word of mouth to discuss brands that brands cannot fully control (Kozinets *et al.* 2010), the "fit" between the brand willing to launch a promotion campaign and the blogger is necessary but not sufficient: readers' adhesion is crucial. Yet, a blog's audience, and particularly loyal readers, usually reject the following features of a blog: commercial content (obvious advertising, sponsored posts) that they think ruin the freshness and trustworthiness of a blog; and identity content (brands promoted that do not belong to the blogger's usual universe, change of fashion style or tone) they feel is not like "their" blogger. Brands thus need to help the blogger keep their perceived identity to nurture the trust link created between them and their audience while entitling the blogger to present the brand the way he or she knows their readers will accept.

That said, what makes content acceptable for bloggers and readers? Readers seek original, genuine and entertaining content. They either care for personal content and stories about the blogger's private life, or for content that teaches them something like how to dress and make up a personal style, or backstage information regarding fashion and luxury brands. That kind of information, however, is scarce and hard to come by. Maintaining a blog's readership therefore requires the ability to obtain and manage scarce resources.

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### *Managing scarce resources*

Fashion blog readers follow blogs, first, for entertainment. They particularly like bloggers' report on the VIP parties they were invited to by hip brands, the fashion shows they could attend thanks to their blog or the exclusive encounters they have had, such as meeting Karl Lagerfeld. Backstage information, breaking news and gossip from the fashion world are particularly appreciated. Desire and envy are also drivers for readership: readers like to wonder why and investigate how bloggers are offered valuable gifts like handbags, clothes or shoes. Readers finally like to gain unusual knowledge about brands and products, like the DNA of a luxury brand or the unknown story of the birth of a jewel or a fragrance. A blog's audience, however, do not like to find the same kind of content on the several blogs they read, which means that bloggers attending the same party or the same promotion event should not all report it the same way and at the same time in their blog. This might be rejected as sponsored content. Not every blogger can have access to exclusive information and events relating to fashion and luxury brands, which makes that exclusive blog content all the more desirable. For that reason, bloggers strive to have access to scarce resources on a permanent basis to ensure the success of their blog.

To arrange permanent provision of scarce resources (branded and entertaining content), popular bloggers have become increasingly organized in cliques reserving access to the sources of scarce content. Fashion bloggers gather in subgroups of closely bound peers or cliques. Generally speaking, each member of a clique is connected with a few marketing agencies, brand representatives or designers who provide them with exclusive content and invitations. The blogger then shares access to that content with the other members of the clique, thus excluding outsiders and newcomers. As a consequence, bloggers from the same clique are likely to work with and attract the same brands and the same kind of brands, while new fashion bloggers or bloggers from another subgroup are denied access to those brands. This mostly impacts how brands handle blog marketing: inviting members of different cliques to the same event often leads to total failure as it revives underlying rivalries. It also contributes to pigeonholing bloggers in categories of brands that the blogger has been associated with, according to his or her history of relationships with brands.

### **Future research on fashion blogging**

Fashion blogging and identity are closely linked. Existing research on fashion blogging has already addressed the following issues: social identity construction through fashion-themed blogs (Chittenden 2010; Heffernan 2008; Palmgren 2008; Pham 2011; Zhao and Belk 2007); identity construction on an individual level, particularly through popularity management and personal branding (Kretz 2010, 2011; Kretz and De Valck 2010a); consumerism and spread of consumerist values through identity and/or product display fashion blogs (Zhao and Belk 2007). Femininity construction (Chittenden 2010; Palmgren 2008; Pham 2011), impact of gender (Palmgren 2008), and the reconstruction of genuine cultural and nation-related imagery, for example, "Asianness" (Pham 2011), have all been studied. Further analysis may be carried out on how cultural values are constructed and digitalized, then disseminated on the web. For example, French fashion-themed blogs construct an image of the "French style" and French values as the majority of the readers are not French. How do bloggers construct and disseminate such values and a collective identity? Popular fashion-themed blogs are mostly written by women and may appear a feminist medium: indeed, female bloggers construct femininity by self-disclosing, displaying what they envision as femininity and what the "male gaze" (Palmgren 2008) should expect. However, very little is known about feminist values constructed and diffused through blogs and social media and their impact on consumer culture.

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Existing research has pointed to fashion-themed blogs as a way to self-develop and earn a living for everyday authors who know how to construct a popular personal brand. Blogger–brand relationships seem to be crucial to the success of a personal brand in the social media context. Yet, this apparently new brand–blogger relationship has so far not been theorized. If brands and bloggers co–produce value within social networks through popularity and personal branding, what are the processes leading to such value creation? What would be the implications regarding social media marketing? Fashion blogs have increasingly extended their loci of presence to social networks, leading to a web of discussion within a social media context. However, the extension of fashion narratives to other online loci than fashion-themed blogs has not been addressed.

We think bloggers now need to be understood in a wider social media context where visibility and popularity can be increased or at least maintained through extension of “social capital” or “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986, 1993, 1996). While social capital and cultural capital have been extensively studied in real-life social networks (Adler and Kwon 2002; Burt 1995, 2000; Lin 1999, 2001), they have not yet been studied in online social networks such as fashion-themed blogs. And yet, style and fashion blogs, because they deal with status, symbolic and cultural products and brands, may provide a unique field for the study of social and cultural capital online. Indeed, greater knowledge of how social and cultural capital interact with online social networks may help us understand phenomena such as the social stratification of social networks where bloggers become more or less popular and successful depending on the resources they can access (i.e., money to finance new projects; genuine content from brands, etc.).

Finally, fashion-themed blogs attract substantial readership and followers. Popular ones are supposed to be highly influential and to drive the purchases of fashion and luxury goods. Yet very little is known regarding the blog audience: What do readers expect from bloggers? Why do they read blogs? Why do they quit blogs? How does influence take place, and why? What can we learn about blog consumers and the consumption of fashion-themed blogs?

### **Notes**

- 1 Source: Euromonitor International. Global consumer expenditures for the fashion category have increased by 30 percent from 2005 to 2010.
- 2 Source: Technorati: The State of the Blogosphere 2010. Available at: <http://technorati.com/blogging/article/who-bloggers-brands-and-consumers-day/page-3> (accessed July 15, 2011).

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