Article

# FASHION BLOGGING: AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND NEW FASHION DISCOURSES

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## INTRODUCTION

The fashion blogger remains the marginalised voice of fashion reportage; 'professional' journalists of traditional print media continue to deny the credibility of their 'amateur' peers.[1] This may be due in part to a perceived lack of credentials, but may also be explained by the potential threat blogs present to print circulation. Their continued rise however, suggests that blogs must be considered as a fully functioning part of the fashion industry, and a valid platform for the authorship, dissemination and consumption of independent and multiple fashion narratives.

A comparison of blogs with fashion magazine media highlights the significant differences they offer as models of communication, in their mode of production and consumption, but also in the relationships between author, audience and text. It is arguable that blogs facilitate a more active audience relationship with the media than do traditional platforms such as magazines, due to their ability to foster participation and reciprocity. Through these features, blogs are able to reflect the lived experiences of their audiences better than traditional media, thereby validating blogs and their content as legitimate texts and sites in the formation of new fashion discourses. In the comments section of blogs, we encounter discussion, interpretation and critique of fashion-related topics; a multiplicity of discourses, relevant to a broad twenty-first-century fashion audience.

In contrast to much previous research on blogging which has focused on blogs as sites of individual identity construction, performance or for concerns relating to representation,[2] this paper is concerned with *context*: situating the content of fashion blogs as representative of a living culture that is shared between author and audience. This paper therefore focuses on the comments posted by bloggers and their audiences, rather than seeking to analyse representations of accompanying photographic images.

## DEMOCRATISATION OF DISCOURSES

Blogs occupy a liminal space in the fashion landscape, with much debate as to the merits of bloggers' journalistic credibility and, in consequence, the role blogs have within wider fashion discourse. Regardless of the sheer proliferation of fashion blogs and their popular appeal, there remains a prejudice and an institutional bias discriminating against the opinions of fashion bloggers. Generally untrained in the fields required for a career in traditional fashion journalism, bloggers' credentials can be deemed inadequate, and their opinions thereby marginalised. Bloggers are generally perceived as amateurs, whether they are or not, and are thereby placed in direct opposition to the 'professionals' who work on fashion magazines. This is true even of bloggers who attend the leading fashion shows around the world, and who maintain substantial audiences and whose posts are followed globally.

It is these blogs which most likely dominate the public consciousness, and yet below this level of activity there exists a much larger realm of blogs, bloggers and audiences. Millions of people create, contribute to and follow blogs from all manner of locations around the world. Often far removed from the cities of *prêt-a-porter* and *haute couture*,

these people can be understood as no less committed, involved and knowledgeable about discourses of fashion, particularly as representative of their own lived experiences. Amateurisation should not be equated with a lowering of standards of quality or authority.

The contemporary world of digital media has significantly altered the field of media production, distribution and consumption, and the argument that bloggers' opinions are an illegitimate source of knowledge due to their amateur status is untenable. Print media has been the traditional source of fashion knowledge and critique for over one hundred years; fashion magazines such as *Vogue* have enjoyed a privileged position of authority in the popular imagination,[3] controlling and defining the general understandings of taste, content and professional practice within fashion journalism. For Manuel Castells, power is located "primarily around the production and diffusion of cultural codes and information content,"[4] and it is print media that has traditionally controlled these aspects.

Digital media has significantly disrupted this monopoly of power, however, as Mark Deuze suggests, working towards the "dismantling of carefully cultivated hierarchical relationships between the (mass) media consumers and producers."[5] This is the effect which Clay Shirky refers to as mass amateurisation, whereby issues of production, reproduction and distribution are much less problematic than in the past.[6] Through the internet, freedom of speech and opinion has the potential to cross all geographical and political borders; the production and distribution of the media no longer requires centralisation or the funding of large corporations. As technology has changed, so has the media and definitions of it and, commensurably, the attributes and roles of those involved within the media industry have also changed.

We must no longer think in terms of amateur–professional distinctions, but analyse more critically the content of the author's[7] work within its particular mode of production and consumption, and attempt to better understand the relationship of this content with its audience and their cultural context. Amateurisation should not be seen as an impediment to understanding a text as valid, authorative or valuable, but rather as an intrinsic aspect of new media in the twenty-first century which has democratised all aspects of the media generally, thereby allowing new discourses to emerge.

The ability of blogs to engage an audience in conversation is a fundamental aspect of this process, and constitutes a crucial component of Deuze's articulation of digital culture: participation.[8] In blogs and blogging, audiences have become more actively engaged through the ability to comment on authors' content; to question, critique or otherwise respond through the comments section is a fundamental feature of blog media. Shirky describes this type of media as a many-to-many model and an historical first in its ability to foster both conversation and group formation; it stands in direct opposition to the one-to-many model represented by print media.[9] Traditional print media offers a unidirectional flow of information; a single representation and point of view that exemplifies the media's traditional position of hegemony. Little dialogue exists between the 'professional' opinion of the author and their audience.

In contrast, blogs provide dialogue between author and multiple audience members through the comments sections, effectively allowing co-authorship of a digital text. There is therefore a multiplicity of representations possible, and the many-to-many media model has enabled greater flexibility in the decoding of media information. The democratisation of authorship that blogging offers undermines the importance of the 'professional' journalist, in the traditional sense of being a prerequisite for valid fashion dialogue. Authorship has become an organic and interactive process; through the act of participation it becomes a collective and collaborative endeavour. Group action and authorship reveal the relevance and importance of blog content; through 'mass amateurisation' we discover a plentitude of voices whose opinions and discussions contribute to the traditional stream of professional and traditional media discourses.

## CULTURE CONSIDERED

The amateur status of bloggers creates specific problems for relationships with the fashion industry; traditional media maintain access to the fashion system in ways bloggers do not. Employees of traditional fashion media such as *Vogue* have access to the highest levels of the fashion industry: clothes, designers, stylists and models, photographers. These are aspects of the industry withheld from bloggers and other 'amateurs.' The élite, traditional media are positioned as the epitome of authority, the height of fashionable culture. Magazines thereby maintain a hierarchically advantageous position as the go-to source of style information and trend forecasting for the general public. Spotlighting the designs and designers of the leading fashion houses of the world, traditional media reaffirms its hegemony, overshadowing other sites and types of fashionable discourses.

As bloggers are effectively excluded from authoritative roles in the traditional fashion system, their problems may seem compounded by isolation from fashion culture more generally. Many bloggers operate in cities far from the world's traditional fashion capitals. While blogs themselves may transcend global borders, the relative geographical isolation of many bloggers could lead to criticism of their perceived lack of understanding of the relationship between fashion and metropolitan cultures and values. Blogs, however, are representative of much greater diversity than that promoted by the traditional media, which offer conventional viewpoints on fashion and the fashion system. While straight comparisons between media types are inevitable, we must seek to recontextualise blogs and bloggers within a new framework that considers their content on terms of its own, and as reflective of the values, beliefs and cultural realities of its particular authors and audiences.

Fashion magazines provide a glimpse into a rarefied and aspirational world, unlikely to be inhabited by the majority of their audience. Here 'fashion' is but a sign, familiar to audiences predominantly through its representations on the pages of magazines and other media formats which rely upon the image. According to Paul Sweetman, fashion "no longer refers to anything other than fashion itself,"[10] and could today be understood as severed from the experiences and everyday lives of its audience. Fashion dialogue within blogs, however, is much more likely to reflect shared beliefs, values and experiences of both author and audience, imparted through combinations of image and text.

"Culture is Ordinary" is the title of an article by Raymond Williams (1958), in which he asserts the importance of culture as a lived and embodied practice.[11] Culture is situated in society as a whole and by everyone, not just an élite defined by an accumulation of certain forms of capital. Pierre Bourdieu has taught us to understand the constructed nature of taste, status, and aesthetic and cultural biases;[12] in this context, we should reconsider preconceptions of traditional media as a dominant site of fashion discourse, organs which are validated only by their specific enculturation.

The traditional magazine as bastion of good fashion taste may hold popular sway historically; however, it is precisely the removal of bloggers and their audiences from this cultural context that validates their position. The realm of blogs epitomises a different conception of culture, and one that is formulated in the daily practices of its subjects. For Williams, much cultural emphasis is placed on experience and "the making of new observations, comparisons and meanings."[13] Blogs work in precisely this way to establish micro-narratives of the everyday. The embodied practices of author and audience elicit discussions of common fashion experiences: "what I wore today," "what I saw in my local store," "how I feel about certain issues related to fashion and the body." These are typical themes of blogs and bloggers, as are reflections on traditional media content. For authors and their audiences, blogs provide spaces to negotiate the terrain where fashion integrates with their particular social practices, lifestyles and values, with an immediacy that further authenticates these practices.

Furthermore, events, ideas and discussions, topics of interest are all played out in relative real-time in the blogosphere. Fashion by its very nature is concerned with change; in the twenty-first century change can happen daily. Blogging can be understood as the perfect media platform to originate, perform, enact, display and discuss fashionable discourses in this age of fluid identities and constant change.

Like Bourdieu, Williams views traditional and popular understandings of 'culture' as evolving from relationships with social institutions and centres of power,[14] but at the same time emphasises a multiplicity of cultures – culture is everywhere. When Williams refers to family conversations, "talking … about our own lives, about people, about feelings,"[15] he could equally be describing the contents of a fashion-related blog. Cultural validity and positions of authority need not rest in traditional sites of power and production, but can be seen to reflect the lived experiences of their subjects. Blogs provide sites of new cultural representations particular to the beliefs, values and meanings of their authors' and readers' lives, negotiated through the interaction of their own participants. Blogs allow the author and audience to also be the subject of discussion, their lives becoming cultural activity, offering valid resources for understanding life in the twenty-first century.

Blogs represent the breadth of contemporary cultures and cosmopolitan lifestyles which have often been neglected by the traditional media. Issues such as perceived racism, as well as specific and discriminatory conceptions of beauty and the body, continue to undermine the relevance of traditional media for large sectors of society. Blogs can be seen to embody not just diversity in their topics, viewpoints and subject matter, but they also reflect a multiplicity of lifestyles, ethnicities, cultural practices, beliefs and value systems that in turn reflect the shared experiences of author and audience. These criteria are embodied in the everyday practices and representations of their subjects, relationships bound by the shared experiences which exist between bloggers and their audiences. Authority exists through authenticity. The importance given to everyday life, as Andre Jansson suggests, "recognises that 'the cultural,' or what is meaningful to people, can be found wherever there is communication and social interaction."[16]

## BLOGS AND NETWORKS

Blogs represent a shift from a vertical, hierarchal media model to a horizontal, participatory model emblematic of the concept of 'networks' developed by Castells.[17] "Distributed" rather than "centralised" is how Jill Walker Rettberg defines blog networks, in that many individual blogs may be interlinked throughout the Web.[18] Authors of one blog are likely audiences of other blogs, possibly with others who are also audience members of their own blog. Therefore, while individual blogs maintain their own social networks of participants, blogs more generally form parts of much greater networks. With a potentially global outreach, blogs represent the technological transformations that are producing the complex social networks seen by Deuze as the dominant form of contemporary social organisation.[19] The ability for meaningful participation and reciprocity produces powerful networks of individuals, whose views and opinions cannot be discounted.

Blogs are subject to their own discriminating set of normative values and expectations. Although unspecified, there is an understood and generally accepted blog etiquette that governs behaviours around authorship and dialogue. For example, authors of blogs who express critical views of others under the cloak of anonymity are likely to be rallied against. Comments are deemed controversial not necessarily by the nature of their opinion, but by the fact that the author is unwilling to reveal their identity. However, a general tendency towards positivity in both postings and comments is evident; authors frequently post images of themselves modelling clothing, and comments are likely to be mostly positive.

Frequently referred to as 'style' blogs, these kinds of postings may appear superficial, but it is these kinds of postings that contextualise fashion in the lives of those who wear it. When somebody posts an image of themselves, that image, that person, that outfit, transcends its geographical specificity, and is contextualised within the lived experiences of all who read and discuss it. While some readers offer no more than a 'thumbs up/ thumbs down' response, others record more meaningful contributions that express the aesthetic values informing their opinions and reveal a broader cultural context. Reciprocity is key; as Chittenden puts it, "commenting is the cornerstone of blogging."[20]

As suggested, positivity dominates most blog content and relates closely to the focus on connectivity described by David Gauntlett when describing a range of making practices.[21] Where Gauntlett writes of "cooperation, reciprocity,

goodwill and trust, orientated towards a society that's nice for everyone to live in,"[22] I extend this theme towards the development of social capital for the individual. Reflecting the ideas of Robert Putman, who suggests that "social networks have value,"[23] blogs can be understood as prime examples of networks and communities with shared values which are extremely important. Not only do these networks provide the micro-narratives of the fashion industry, they provide the social connections which reflect the everyday lived experiences of their subjects. Indeed, these two aspects cannot be separated. Through social networks comes social capital, accumulated and facilitating increased solidarity and collective action. Mass amateurisation of new technology has enabled increased networking, fostering the accumulation of social capital that is helping to underpin new community formations, which may then reveal themselves in the expressions of new fashion discourses. Social capital both bridges diversity and strengthens the bonds within existing groups – loose ties that bind the minds and memories of their members towards the dissemination of future discourses.

Distinct from traditional media, blogging allows a fluid and constant renegotiation of cultural values and practices through online dialogue. Fostering the kinds of communities that Michel Maffesoli describes as "neo-tribal,"[24] blogs can be seen to operate as "projects," which Castells suggests aim to "change mainstream society to find a place in it."[25] Blogs provide an aesthetic form of sociality that is an expression of "shared feelings and experiences."[26] For Castells, culture is the new zone of social conflict,[27] and for Deuze there is a relocation of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication.[28] It is evident that blogs should not be subject to flippancy, but should rather be understood as an emerging media form – and one that holds wide popular appeal that undermines the single-natured authority of traditional media.

## CONCLUSION

Blogging has become a worldwide phenomenon. Fashion blogs number in the millions, with audiences that transcend geographical, cultural and ethnic borders. Yet as a relatively recent media platform, blogs are generally compared to traditional media such as the fashion magazines that are their precursors. Blogging's relevance and importance is thereby downplayed, as comparisons focus on professional–amateur oppositions that legitimise traditional media formats as sites of cultural authority. As a platform, however, blogging has democratised the ability of subjects to participate in meaningful dialogue on a global scale, and amateur status should not be read as lacking credibility. Blogs can be seen to break down previous structures of production, distribution and consumption of media content, and thereby the power of centralised institutions to dominate fashion discourse.

Unlike traditional media, blogs allow a high degree of audience participation. Comments sections allow for the reciprocity of ideas and opinions as communication channels flow across vast networks – avenues that did not exist previously. The types of discussions that occur within blogs between authors and their audiences reflect the cultural and aesthetic values they share. Unlike traditional media, which are more likely to represent aspirational scenarios of fashion, blogs are more likely to contextualise fashion within the lived experiences of their audiences. Fashion is an embodied practice whose many themes and issues are played out in the comments sections of blogs worldwide. The importance of these beliefs and values should not be belittled, or be marginalised by the shadow cast by traditional media. Instead, blogs operate as social networks, producing both valuable social capital between their participants that would otherwise not exist, and content that is representative of the hugely diverse lifestyles and daily fashion practices that occupy people across the world.

While traditional media continues to provide a homogenised representation of the fashion industry, blogs, bloggers and their audiences provide a multiplicity of perspectives that more closely reflect the way people connect fashion with the lifestyles they are living in the twenty-first century.

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1    Natalie McCreesh, "Vogue's Attack on Style Bloggers shows how much the Newcomers have the Fashion Magazines Rattled," *Independent*, 4 October 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/vogue-s-attack-on-style-bloggers-shows-how-much-newcomers-have-fashion-magazines-rattled-a7342381.html (accessed 28 April 2017).

2    See Agnes Rocamora, "Personal Fashion Blogs: Screens and Mirrors in Digital Self-portraits," *Fashion Theory*, 15:4 (2011), 407-24; and Tara Chittenden, "Digital Dressing up: Modelling Female Teen Identity in the Discursive Spaces of the Fashion Blogosphere," *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13:4 (2010), 505-20.

3    By using the term "popular imagination," I am referring to an audience drawn from the general population, not one with specialist training or scholastic knowledge in the field of, for instance, cultural studies and the study of dress. References to *Vogue* as the fashion 'Bible' are frequent in popular culture and highlight the importance that the traditional magazine format has had in the construction and dissemination of fashion discourses historically.

4    Felix Stalder, *Manuel Castells: Theory of the Network Society* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 99.

5    Mark Deuze, "Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture," *The Information Society*, 22:2 (2006), 65.

6    Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody; The Power of Organising Without Organisations* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 59.

7    In the context of this paper, the term "author" refers to the host and founder of a particular blog who is the initiator of individual blog posts. "Audiences" then denote other parties who refer to and/or comment on these postings.

8    Deuze, "Participation, Remediation, Bricolage."

9    Clay Shirky, *How Social Media Can Make History*, TED.com, June 2009, http://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history.html (accessed 23 April 2017).

10   Paul Sweetman, "Shop-window Dummies? Fashion, the Body, and Emergent Socialities," in *Body Dressing*, eds Joanna Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 63.

11   Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *Conviction*, ed. Norman McKenzie (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1958).

12   Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

13   Williams. "Culture is Ordinary," 93.

14   Ibid.

15   Ibid., 99.

16   Andre Jansson, "The Mediatization of Consumption: Towards an Analytical Framework of Image Culture," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 2:5 (2002), 9.

17   *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, ed. Manuel Castells (Cheltenham and Northhampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2004).

18   Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 61-2.

19   Deuze, "Participation, Remediation, Bricolage," 66.

20   Chittenden, "Digital Dressing up," 515.

21   David Gauntlett, *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, from D.I.Y and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011).

22   Ibid., 130.

23   Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2000), 19.

24   Sweetman, "Shop-window Dummies?" 70.

25   Stalder, *Manuel Castells*, 86.

26   Sweetman, "Shop-window Dummies?" 70.

27   Stalder, *Manuel Castells*, 87.

28   Deuze, "Participation, Remediation, Bricolage," 65.