Fashion bloggers and the democratization of fashion in today’s digital communication society: A challenge to global media outlets?

Present day digital communication environments establish inclusive platforms, where like-minded individuals gather together to form a digital culture striving for mutual exchange of ideas, inspiration, art, fashion, and style. Challenging the fashion paradigm imposed in big media outlets, fashion blogs substantially contribute to the democratization of fashion and freedom of aesthetic expression. With the growing...
influence and presence of the Internet in people’s everyday lives, bloggers are able to
deconstruct the established authority of magazines. Blogs favor the ‘electronic word
of mouth’, defined as: “Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual
or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a
multitude of people and institutions via the Internet.” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004,
p.39)

At a more general level, social media and fashion blogs aid democracy
through an increase in the number of spaces available for deliberation and dissent.
This counters mass media vertical communication systems: blogs produce user
generated content and individual bloggers claim their “right to look” by conveying
their own view on fashion (Mirzoeff, 2012). Furthermore, Blogs enable ordinary
people to bypass established editorial filters and turn their personal sense of style and
aesthetics into a source of inspiration for their readers, reducing dependency on
carefully crafted and chosen fashion and trends offered by global media. In return,
each individual participating in blogs has the power to step in the conversation
engaged by bloggers and influence the content produced through a mobile, interactive
relationship between both parts.

The endless creative potential of blogs circumvents the rules established by
power holders such as investors or media moguls. (Cheong & Morrison, 2008) As a
result, blogs have the possibility to showcase a wider variety of clothing and brands,
not limited to the ones sponsoring magazines and subsequently being shown in them.
Founders of blogs and their creative audience try to establish a degree of citizen
control over these abuses and declare their right to freedom of communication
without corporate control or interference (Curran, 2012). Even though bloggers might
feature sponsored content, they are perceived as more trustworthy and credible than
producer generated content (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Indeed, unlike magazines,
blogs are not managed by a team of editors. Viewers can control and judge the
honesty of bloggers – and, if they decide to do so – denounce their abuses. They tend,
in general, to see these sources as more relatable, and value bloggers for their ability
to change the field of fashion. They become trendsetters and include their viewers in
the creation of new trends.

Their influence has been measured by numerous studies. Nick Blunden, in
“The Economist and Bloom Worldwide report” describes bloggers as: “a cohort of
influencers who both are sophisticated media consumers whose reach is coveted by not only media companies but also brands… They curate, they consume and they create.” (The rise, 2017) Addressing the influence of fashion blogs on 18-24 years old females, the study reveals that fashion blogs are not only used as an information source, but also as a measure for personal social acceptance (Social). People read blogs to determine which trends or styles to adopt or avoid in order to gain confidence and construct their own identity. This confirms Festinger’s theory on social comparison, which claims that consumers will tend to respond to uncertainty by comparing themselves to others similar to them, this in order to ameliorate their self-esteem (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2011). The influence of blogs occurs at a collective level since readers form their opinions by reading a variety of blogs promoting for instance a particular trend. A participant says: “I was never into the color turquoise until I saw people wearing them on every single blog I followed yeah so it’s that kind of thing, I was never into turquoise until I figured out “oh everyone’s wearing it.” (Social)

Fashion blogging is thus making a previously exclusive industry more inclusive to outsiders and is encouraging conversation between consumers. Fashion bloggers are not only giving their readers an insider look into the fashion industry but they influence it and modify it by starting trends and influencing brands. Some blogs however, such as High Snobiety and Go Fug Yourself have transformed into online magazines following a different writing style, layout and social media presence than a normal blog. Both of them are led by several bloggers and have reached professional level attracting greater audience. However, both of them lost their interactive audience and receive less comments than before. The six most recent posts from The Highsnobiety show zero comments, while the two recent posts from Go Fug Yourself saw the number of their comments drop – respectively 17 and 13 comments.
We can deduce here that blog readers appreciate blogger’s individual approach over professional developed content developed by multiple people. Blogposts from fashion photographer The Sartorialist can for instance reach over 450 comments discussing the photography or the style of the person in the picture.
His “Biography” page says: “Founder/blogger/photographer Scott Schuman began The Sartorialist with the idea of creating a two-way dialogue about the world of fashion and its relationship to daily life”. This suggests his desire to invite the audience to engage with the content he posts. Kayture by Kristina Bazan, another fashion blog, is known as the first influencer to partner with high luxury brands such as Chopard, Piaget, Cartier and Louis Vuitton. Yet even though she features sponsored content from these brands, her readers are very loyal and she often receives more than 100 comments a post.

The comments cited below demonstrate the deep emotional connection established throughout the years between the blogger and her readership. Kristina Bazan stands out from other bloggers as she often answers to her readers’ comments and builds a loyal community by organizing “Meet and Greet” events where she actually meets her fans in real life.
In both cases, even though some bloggers feature sponsored content, they continue to be perceived as trustworthy since they engage with their readers.

*The Sartorialist* and *Kayture by Kristina Bazan* fashion blogs demonstrate how fashion blogging is impacting social media within the fashion industry on a higher level than traditional media. Brands such as L’Oréal Paris have understood the great potential of bloggers and influencers, who connect with their readers on a personal level. Following the Los Angeles Times, “70 percent of the budget given to one of the PR firms enlisted by L’Oréal goes toward influencers, with just 30 percent relegated to traditional, editorial placement” (Strugatz). Following Alessio Sanzogni, group general manager of Chiara Ferragni *Theblondesalad.com* and *Chiara Ferragni Collection*, “Blogger engagement used to happen only in the digital world, but now it inspires a full integrated communication plan which can be leveraged on the consistency of a genuine story. That’s the upcoming way of doing marketing” (Strugatz). As opposed to print media conveying one-sided messages, blogs thus “keep the conversation going” and allow every day consumers to become part of the fashion industry. On 1000 individuals over 16 years, a survey reveals, influencers
content accounts for almost 20% of consumer media consumption, with 57% of people basing their purchases solely on online influencer recommendation. Average consumers spend more than an hour looking at influencer’s content a day. (Mortimer, 2017).

Another study “The Role of Social Media in the Fashion Industry: How Fashion Blogging Encourages Two-Way Symmetrical Communication” furthermore underlines the impact of social media on the transformation of brands (Durmaz, 2014). For an industry that’s always been elitist, fashion bloggers have forced brands to think differently and focus on engagement with consumers who prefer “authentic, trusted opinion, over and above the voice of the brand itself.” (The Rise, 2017).

According to Nielsen’s latest biennial Global Survey of Trust in Advertising, involving 30,000 individuals in 60 countries, more than 81% people vote “personal recommendation” as the most trusted form of advertising, followed by “consumer opinions online” (58%).

This new form of influence is less about imposing aesthetic norms and values or arguing and coercing a particular point of view, than it is about advocating, engaging with the audience and inviting them to an open debate. In the past, influencers who were generally portrayed in the press and corporate media were primarily celebrities and well-known figures. Today, the space allowed by social media nurtures new kind of influencers who often come from nowhere and build themselves up. John Demsey, executive group president at Estée Lauder Cos claims: “The new celebrities are the social influencers, and quite honestly some make more money than the people who get Emmy Awards.” (Strugatz)

Yet a risk occurs when companies offer free products to bloggers in hope that they will share their experience with their audience. (Dunlop, 2010) Even though bloggers can include sponsored content on their websites, they must be very cautious about the products that they recommend and should always label it as sponsored content. British blogger, Jane Cunningham says: “I am well aware that women buy products through links on my site – but selling can never be a primary concern because it changes how and why you blog.” (The Rise, 2017) Recognizing the impact they have on their audience, bloggers are careful on what they recommend because they do not want to shift the attention from their own identity and voice to sharing a message about a brand that they do not identify themselves with. Furthermore, bloggers pay attention to the quality of the products that they recommend, in order not
to lose their readership: “even though some of the bloggers used product placement and accepted free products from companies, the participants did not regard them as biased because they believed the bloggers would only blog about products which they believe were good.”

Bloggers have thus become citizen journalists with a fashion twist. They challenge the fashion paradigm set by media outlets and offer a fresh and objective perspective on the industry. Their success lies in their democratization of fashion. Advocating for a two-way communication and debate, they value the opinion of their readers. Although bloggers have been criticized for featuring sponsored content on their platforms, they are still regarded as credible and trustworthy because they put the interest of their audience over the interest of the brand. They empower their readers by encouraging a creative freedom of expression rather than blindly following the aesthetic that traditional media outlets are trying to impose.
Bibliography:


