

The fashion blogosphere: Success from the readers' perspective

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Abstract

The role of blogs and bloggers as conduits of fashion information has strengthened through their growing popularity with fashion consumers. Convenience has been identified as a key reason why fashion consumers use the Internet and social media, enabling them to quickly and easily find trend information, new products and retailer discounts. While research into blogs and blogging is growing, little is given of how blog readers perceive and merit the success of fashion blogs. In this study, we aim to promote a better understanding of the characteristics that fashion blog readers value as contributing factors of a successful fashion blog. This is achieved through an exploration of blog readers' opinions and through the identification of key blogging trends focusing on female fashion bloggers and readers. The most significant measure of a blog's success was found to be how relevant it is to its readers, the qualities of which are revealed in this article.

Keywords

blog
fashion
blogger
media
consumer

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The importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

Consumers enjoy using social media networks to engage and advise others about products, services and companies, which can influence opinions and even buying behaviours. Gul et al. (2014) found that 43 per cent of their respondents agreed that they would purchase a product from a fashion brand after reading positive public opinions on social media; more interestingly, almost 60 per cent of their respondents claimed to be discouraged from buying something if it had received negative public opinions, thus suggesting that negative eWOM may be more influential than positive eWOM. Currently fashion brands have no means of filtering eWOM communications to protect their brand image and, as Mohr (2013) recognized, it is often difficult for followers to determine fact from opinion.

Fashion blogs and bloggers

According to Moore (2011), a fashion blog records 'street-style' described by time and location. Hanssen et al. (2010) describe today's fashion bloggers as revolutionary documenting and commenting on fashion trends, catwalks, celebrity culture and other inspiring topics. McQuarrie et al. (2013) believe that bloggers give fashion guidance that cannot be found in other sources such as magazines. Hanssen et al. (2010) consider the personal perspective to be a strength of fashion blogs, providing readers with honest, positive or negative information. However, McQuarrie et al. (2013) question the authenticity of the blogger, believing they create personas. The casual style of language that bloggers use is considered to be more relevant than traditional fashion media as important fashion information is 'garnished with personal views' (Mantel 2010). This is considered to result in

more honest opinions. According to Mohr (2013) brands positively view bloggers as ‘the new journalists and influencers’ who can boost sales and access a wider audience.

Independent fashion bloggers

Although the fashion blogosphere is made up of both independent and corporate sites (Rocamora 2012), a fashion blogger does not have to work for or represent a retailer or fashion brand. Givhan (2014) believes that the opinions of traditional and professional industry members are becoming less important, while the opinions of fashion bloggers are becoming more important. Rocamora (2012) states that bloggers are not just consumers who use the Internet; rather, they are ‘active participants in the creation of news’, suggesting that bloggers are taking up a journalistic role despite lacking appropriate qualifications. For Findlay (2013), the lack of appropriate qualifications is not an issue owing to the belief that there is no correct way to write about fashion. Schroeder (2002), however, recognizes that bloggers must still somehow comply with the established ‘visual and aesthetic vocabularies’ of the fashion system – a system that extends beyond fashion business and consumption to include social and cultural occurrences. Therefore, if bloggers are to model fashion, blog readers expect them to do so in a similar way to traditional fashion media.

The motives for a blogger to blog provide a particular point of controversy as big name fashion bloggers can earn six-figure salaries from blogging alone (Anon. 2014). This is achieved through charging for appearances at events, affiliating sales or even charging for Instagram posts or tweets. According to Strugatz and Yi (2014), fashion bloggers themselves are viewed by some as brands, not just as an advertising tool used by fashion brands. McQuarrie et al. (2013) view these economic rewards as a display of improved social positioning, thus implying that fashion bloggers who receive

money or gifts enjoy an elevated position; this may or may not be regarded as a measure of a fashion blog's success. The main bone of contention lies largely with what is perceived to be the bloggers' priorities. However, if bloggers prioritize on providing a good service for their readers and happen to benefit financially from brands that are willing to pay the large sums of money, is this not purely the bloggers' good fortune. Likewise, if the priority is to earn large sums of money, so long as the blogger provides a valuable service to their readers, are they not simply business-savvy as opposed to being immoral in the way they do business. The motivation therefore becomes more of a matter of opinion of individuals with little or no real significance.

Reasons for reading fashion blogs

There is limited research regarding why consumers use fashion blogs; however, the following four viewpoints were evident: opinion leaders, seeking advice, virtual communities, and speed and convenience.

Opinion leaders

Wolny and Mueller (2013) studied the effects of fashion consumers' motives to engage in eWOM through social media, concluding that because many consumers follow 'opinion leaders'; they like to use social media as a tool to communicate on fashion issues. Opinion leaders have the ability to spread information, influence decisions and help new ideas gain traction (Fournier and Lee 2009).

Wolny and Mueller (2013) believe that the dynamic of the fashion industry is changing and it is gradually being less established by industry leaders and more so by consumers. Moore (2011) states that fashion bloggers are early adopters of fashion trends, having a similar effect to that of an opinion leader.

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Seeking advice

Those seen as opinion leaders in the fashion blogosphere are often targeted by readers and consumers for advice on fashion. Topics that have been discussed between fashion bloggers and their readers include 'experiences, sales, product alternatives, favourite shops and product details such as size and price' (Kulmala et al. 2013). Wolny and Mueller (2013) suggest that consumers seek advice from fellow consumers and opinion leaders as they are considered to be a more trustworthy source. However, Colucci and Cho (2014) suggest that bloggers who are 'active within the industry they blog about' and have links to other companies are seen to be more trustworthy and authentic.

Virtual communities

For some, being part of a virtual community is another strong motivational factor as readers can chat with each other; however, not all blog readers take part in the conversations. Marketing Conference Services (2014) found that some of their participants were reading and keeping up with the dialogue on fashion blogs but were not actually contributing. They conclude that these particular blog readers were 'devotees' because their 'consumption activity was high but their ties to the community were weak'. This corroborates with a study by Pihl (2013) who found from studying eighteen Swedish fashion blogs that the readers who did not engage with the blog comments section still considered themselves to be a part of the virtual community, though as an 'outside observer'. According to McQuarrie et al. (2013), fashion blogs draw like-minded readers together, further cementing the virtual community dynamic.

Speed and convenience

Fashion bloggers link past posts to their more recent ones or they link to other fashion bloggers, thus continually providing readers with new fashion content unlike fashion magazines, which are static and do not reflect the increased speed of the fashion cycle. Social media, and more specifically fashion blogs, can provide the reader with endless information, old or new, with just one click (Rocamora 2012).

Measuring a fashion blog's success

According to Marketing Conference Services (2014), there are four key characteristics of a successful fashion blogger: trustworthiness, expertise, authenticity and personal relevance to the reader. However, Mohr (2013) states that a 'blog's effectiveness is due to its strong individual, personal, popular and elitist point of view', though there is no evidence to support this. There are many websites that provide lists of the 'most influential fashion blogs' or the 'best fashion blogs to follow'; however, these are mostly ranked using only the number of followers as the quantifying factor. One of the most in-depth lists, 'Style 99' by Signature9, a fashion business and consumer trend site, claims that their ranking is 'all about engagement' due to taking factors into consideration such as blog frequency and social media sharing data (Ousley 2014); however, the method is largely qualitative and only reflects the views of the fashion industry. Through primary research this article further explores the measurement of fashion blogs' success through the readers' perspective with additional accounts from a fashion blogger.

Research methods

To investigate the fashion blogger and blog reader relationship a focus group with six purposely selected female fashion blog readers was conducted to explore their opinions and in order to reveal

the current emerging themes of why, and how, bloggers are becoming successful and influential. The size of the group complies with the general research methods theory, and one focus group was found sufficient to both uncover the emerging themes and to design the questionnaire for the larger-scale survey (Bryman 2012). A 'Fashion Blogger Pack' was provided as a visual aid consisting of information and blog posts from two influential fashion bloggers, 'The Pixie Cut' and 'That Pommie Girl'. The blogging careers of the two bloggers were given in a concise chronological timeline through the blogs. Despite their careers beginning at the same time, the bloggers use two different styles of blogging. The questions encouraged the focus group participants to comment on the differences and similarities of those two styles. The data obtained were very rich in qualitative insights and opinions, and highlighted certain terminology. The questionnaire survey was then conducted to further verify the views of the focus group members and to acquire further data that would not have been apparent had the survey preceded the focus group. The questionnaire was distributed online and promoted through social media and e-mail and returned 44 responses. An interview was also conducted with a fashion blogger to provide further insights into the fashion blogger's self-perception in relation to the success of their blog.

Discussion of findings

The findings are categorized into the key trends that were previously identified from the focus group.

Blog reading behaviour

While the fashion blogger interviewee confirmed blogging at least every other day to keep the content fresh, only two of the survey respondents claimed to read fashion blog posts daily, while seventeen read weekly, five read fortnightly and twenty read monthly. This may suggest that

frequency of visits is not a reliable measurement of a fashion blog's success. Of the 44 respondents, 35 confirmed following their preferred fashion bloggers on social media networks as well as reading their blog: Instagram was most commonly used (94.3%) followed by Twitter (51.4%), Facebook (31.4%), Youtube (22.9%), Pinterest (22.9%), Google (2.9%) and Weibo (2.9%); none used LinkedIn for this purpose.

When respondents were asked the main reason why they use social media to follow fashion bloggers, 47.7% said it was more convenient, corroborating with the views of the focus group. Other reasons were as follows: it is quicker (15.9%); provides more concise information (6.8%); and has better visuals (20.5%). Four respondents gave the following additional reasons: it is funnier and more personal; it lets you know when a new post is up; it lets you post different things to their blogs; and it is often less formal. The use of social media to make readers aware of new posts is a technique confirmed by the fashion blogger interviewee who often uses Twitter to promote her new blog posts and Instagram to upload relevant pictures. Some of the focus group members stated that they thought that this type of promotion was a positive thing that benefits both the blogger and the reader. For example, Participant 4 said that by using social media to promote fashion blogs, the blogger can target different types of people at once, inferring that a larger demographic of people is exposed to the blog. Participant 5 admitted that she first discovered one of the bloggers that was discussed in the focus group via Instagram. Participants 2 and 3 also agreed on the benefits of following fashion bloggers on social media; this is because they do not need to read the whole post. Instead, they can find and select key information due to the concise nature of certain social media platforms. For example, Instagram users can capture images, edit, caption and upload them to their

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followers, who can then like or share them, making it ideal for fashion blogging; and Twitter allows users to follow and 'retweet' each other to share tweets.

Reasons for reading fashion blogs

When asked why they read fashion blogs, 56.8% selected fashion inspiration. None of the respondents claimed to follow fashion bloggers to be a part of a social group, which appears to link to Pihl's (2013) theory of outside observers. Other reasons include the following: product reviews (9.1%), readily available (6.8%), cheaper than fashion magazines (6.8%), and to aid purchase decisions (9.1%).

A large majority of respondents (79.5%) thought that fashion blogs were more relevant than fashion magazines, concurring with the views of Mantel (2010). Participant 4 of the focus group strongly agreed with this view, saying, '[...] they are more relatable and approachable compared to the fashion writers and editors [of] the big magazines'. It would suggest that a fashion blogger is successful in communicating with their followers when they appear to be relevant to them through user-generated content. A small percentage of the sample added comments stating their preference for a fashion blog over magazines because it gives them access to other related sites such as online shops. The fashion blogger interviewee highlighted the point that 'magazines often go to print long before things are released and then you have to hunt them down'.

Factors that encourage the initial appeal of a fashion blog were found to be the blogger's personal style (54.5%), followed by good imagery (20.5%), honest product reviews (13.6%), style of language (6.8%), blog design (2.3%) and other (2.3%). The one respondent who opted for 'other' declared this to be 'humour'. The interviewee emphasized the importance of her own personal style and

portraying it through her blog, which contradicts McQuarrie et al.'s (2013) theory that fashion bloggers create personas. The focus group participants discussed how the blogger's style had to appeal to their own personal style because they are influenced by bloggers who provide them with style ideas. This may imply that successful fashion blogs are chosen by people because they see some of their own style in the blog posts, which corroborates with Colucci and Cho (2014) who found that 'blog users expressed more trust of bloggers who demonstrated personal qualities that were similar to themselves'.

Important features of a fashion blogger, blog and their content

Using a 1–5 rating scale (1 being the least and 5 being the most important), the survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of certain qualities in fashion bloggers, blogs and content. The factors were identified from the focus group discussions. The results are shown in tables 1, 2 and 3 respectively.

As shown in table 1, passion for the topic yielded the highest response of importance in relation to qualities of a fashion blogger, which corroborates with the views of the focus group and supports Lau's views (Hanssen et al. 2010) that fashion bloggers should be motivated by genuine enthusiasm rather than by fame or money. Participants also mentioned that they felt bored if posts did not show enough enthusiasm. This could indicate that in order for a fashion blog to be successful they need to keep readers interested by showing genuine passion to their following. Trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility also yielded high responses.

	Rate
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Quality:	Lowest Highest				
	1	2	3	4	5
Appearance	3 (6.8%)	1 (2.3%)	11 (25%)	14 (31.8%)	15 (34.1%)
Body Shape	8 (18.2%)	9 (20.5%)	14 (31.8%)	10 (22.7%)	3 (6.8%)
Attractiveness	5 (11.4%)	8 (18.2%)	11 (25%)	15 (34.1%)	5 (11.4%)
Passion for the Topic	0	2 (4.5%)	2 (4.5%)	8 (18.2%)	32 (72.7%)
Credibility	1 (2.3%)	2 (4.5%)	5 (11.4%)	18 (40.9%)	18 (40.9%)
Trustworthiness	2 (4.5%)	2 (4.5%)	8 (18.2%)	11 (25%)	21 (47.7%)
Fashion Qualifications	13 (29.5%)	14 (31.8%)	11 (25%)	3 (6.8%)	3 (6.8%)
Authenticity	1 (2.3%)	4 (9.1%)	8 (18.2%)	10 (22 7%)	21 (47.7%)

Table 1: The importance of fashion blogger qualities.

However, when comparing the two bloggers in the fashion blogger pack, Participant 5 favoured 'That Pommie Girl' over 'The Pixie Cut', stating, 'my reasons are going to sound shallow but I think she is

prettier'. The group agreed that because fashion bloggers are essentially modelling clothes, 'they need to look model-like, to a certain extent'. When asked if personality or attractiveness was more important, the participants said that a combination of the two works best. However, as fashion blogging is a visual concept, the visual aspects of a fashion blog are far more likely to stand out and will be scrutinized first. This is evident in a comment from Participant 2: 'I'll judge whether I like something by seeing it straight away. So if you think about it, I'm judging the blogger without realising it'. This also suggests that in fashion blogging, although the main priority it is the clothing that is being reviewed, 'the hanger' is also just as important. This supports McQuarrie et al.'s (2013) view that blog readers can only judge fashion when they are seen on the body, as this is more effective.

Attractiveness could also portray aspiration in a fashion blogger. The focus group perceived fashion blogs to be aspirational in general and therefore the people behind the blogs have to be aspirational too. This suggests that blog readers want visual inspiration from the blogs they read, concurring with 56.8 per cent of the survey respondents' reasons for why they read fashion blogs. This may suggest that in order to be successful, a fashion blogger should show aspirational qualities in both physical and intellectual sense as this validates the rest of the blog content. It could be inferred that those who are deemed to be more attractive are predisposed to having a more successful blog. This would support the research by McQuarrie et al. (2013) who found that bloggers who do not show their faces or wear the clothes themselves had a smaller following than those who did.

A fashion qualification was the least important quality that people looked for in fashion bloggers, concurring with the interviewee's opinion. This suggests that many blog readers do not agree with the general industry viewpoint that bloggers need fashion credentials in order to contribute to fashion media, and agrees with Findlay (2013).

The questionnaire findings in Table 2 show 'image quality' to be the most important element of fashion blog design, according to 84.1 per cent of the survey sample. This corroborates with the views of the focus group participants who identified key elements that make a blog image look professional and of a high quality, including the following: location and setting, camera type, variety of angles and image clarity. These features can also be found in fashion magazine imagery, indicating that fashion bloggers may take inspiration from these magazines. Of the focus group, Participant 4 said that these elements have to be considered in blog photography, if they are to contend with fashion magazines. However, only 11.4 per cent declared that they would begin to follow a fashion blogger based on good imagery. Colucci and Cho (2014) found that quality images on an 'image-based blog' were just as important as it 'enhances the credibility of the information' and 'makes the site look better'. Participant 2 also thought that better images showed the experience of the blogger, highlighting the other aspects of blogging that had been taken into consideration.

Element:	Rate				
	Lowest				Highest
	1	2	3	4	5

Logo Design	4 (9.1%)	7 (15.9%)	10 (22.7%)	14 (31.8%)	9 (20.5%)
Page Layout	0	0	7 (15.9%)	13 (29.5%)	24 (54.5%)
Image Quality	0	0	2 (4.5%)	5 (11.4%)	37 (84.1%)
Fonts Used	1 (2.3%)	0	17 (38.6%)	16 (36.4%)	10 (22.7%)
Blog Text / Content	0	1 (2.3%)	3 (6.8%)	14 (31.8%)	26 (59.1%)

Table 2: The important elements of fashion blog design.

Of the respondents, 59.1 per cent believed the design of the blog content to be very important. The interviewee agreed as it can make a blog 'easier to read, as well as being aesthetically pleasing'. She describes her own blog as 'fairly clean and minimal'. The design of her blog can be considered successful as the focus group used these words to describe what a successful blog looked like in their opinion. Participant 1 said, 'it must be easy to use and to get around, I think the simpler the better'. This view is shared by Participant 3 who thought that 'there is definitely a correlation between minimal design and a blog's popularity. If something is user-friendly that will encourage me to go back to that site again'. The comments corroborate with Colucci and Cho (2014) who also describe good blog design with words such as 'simple and clean'. In contrast, they state that 'visual clutter was considered to be a reflection of amateurism'. This is supported by Participant 4 who said, 'there is

nothing worse than a cluttered layout that is far too busy. That just looks tacky'. This suggests that bad design can be off-putting for a blog reader and therefore discourages them to become a loyal reader of that blog.

The important content features of a fashion blog results are shown in Table 3. The two attributes that were deemed the most important in relation to blog content were styling ideas (52.3%) and inspirational posts (47.7%); in addition, 34.4% believe having fashion knowledge is highly important. This could suggest that respondents believe that fashion knowledge can be gained without qualifications and relies primarily on passion for the subject. Almost half of the respondents (47.6%) rated advice and tips quite highly with an additional 20.5% rating this feature very highly, suggesting this to be an important aspect in the fashion blog content.

Features:	Rate				
	Lowest				Highest
	1	2	3	4	5
Styling ideas	0	1 (2.3%)	4 (9.1%)	16 (36.4%)	22 (52.3%)
Product reviews	0	4 (9.1%)	10 (22.7%)	17 (38.6%)	13 (29.5%)
Inspirational images & posts	0	4 (9.1%)	4 (9.1%)	15 (34.1%)	21 (47.7%)

Fashion knowledge	1 (2.3%)	4 (9.1%)	6 (13.6%)	17 (38.6%)	14 (34.1%)
Links to fashion brands / promotion	3 (6.8%)	12 (27.3%)	12 (27.3%)	11 (25%)	6 (13.6%)
Advice and tips	1 (2.3%)	0	13 (29.5%)	20 (47.7%)	9 (20.5%)

Table 3: The important content features of a fashion blog.

The style of language was discussed at length during the focus group. Survey responses to the same question revealed that 54.6% preferred a casual and informal style of language as it is easier to read and more relevant to them. Only 6.8% preferred a formal and professional tone, suggesting that a casual approach is important when writing a successful fashion blog. However, 38.6% of the sample thought that a mixture of both formal and informal was more preferable. The findings concurred with the views of the focus group members. They described the bloggers who wrote in this way as more accessible and approachable. The term relatable, or relevant, reoccurred many times and could be a factor most critical to a bloggers' success. The fashion blogger interviewee believes her blog became more popular due to it being 'fairly friendly', which comes across to her followers. She describes her tone of voice throughout her blog as 'it's as if I am talking to a friend' and chose this approach as it is 'easier to read and relate to'. Despite only 6.8% of the respondents preferring a formal style of language, spelling and grammar were criticized by the focus group members. For example, participant 1 said, 'I have noticed quite a few grammar mistakes [...] I personally think that this comes across as very unprofessional [...] it feels sloppy and rushed'. Diversity in opinions may demonstrate a need for

a combination of formal and informal language to create a successful and easy-to-read fashion blog post.

When questioned, 38.6% of the sample preferred to read just one paragraph of text and 31.8% preferred two paragraphs. Moreover, all respondents preferred having at least some text in a fashion blog post as opposed to no text at all. This reinforces that although fashion blogging is predominately visual, there needs to be some text to accompany it to support legibility. However, text was not considered to be important without photographs; 43.2% of the respondents preferred only photographs and the remaining 56.8% preferred a mix of both images and text. The focus group highlighted details such as delivery times and size issues as being important content, which relates to the research by Kulmala et al. (2013), and thus demonstrates that 'shopper experiences' are what blog readers want to know. The focus group also felt the same about the role of photographs in a fashion blog. For example, close-ups and a variety of shots are important according to Participant 5. She would look at physical garments in the same way when visiting a shop, especially if she was considering making a purchase, as she states, 'I want to see the details'. This corroborates with 56.8% of the survey sample who thought both text and imagery are important in a fashion blog and suggests that there needs to be a balance of the two for a successful blog.

Brand collaborations

Of the survey respondents, 63.3 per cent believed collaborations add to a bloggers' credibility. The interviewee felt brand involvement had a positive impact on her following and therefore contributes to a blogger's success and increases credibility. The focus group findings implied that fashion bloggers should utilize the reputation that comes with a well-known fashion brand to promote their own blog

and increase the size of their following. However, care needs to be taken to stay as individual as possible so that the initial appeal of their blog is not lost and there is as little bias as possible.

Conclusion

This research study set out to establish the fashion blogger/fashion blog reader relationship to promote a better understanding of the characteristics that readers value as contributing factors of a successful fashion blog. To achieve this, three data collection methods were used. The focus group exercise comprising six fashion blog readers resulted in a set of qualitative data and informed the design of the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire survey contributed further to the data set. Finally, valuable insights were achieved through a semi-structured interview with a fashion blogger, which served to verify much of the qualitative data. The primary research findings are discussed in the article in relation to the key findings from secondary resources. The main characteristics considered vital, or at the very least useful for a successful blog can be summarized as follows; however, it should be reiterated that while the findings are highly valuable to make generalizations larger-scale surveys should be considered.

The secondary research suggests that a fashion blog should be well planned with interesting and relevant content that is regularly updated; four characteristics were considered important: trustworthiness, expertise, authenticity and being relevant to the reader. The findings from this study suggest that frequency of visits to blogs is not a suitable measure of success. The promotion of brands through social media platforms requires care not to over promote though considered to be an important method to gain followers. Bloggers should relate to their blog readers to appeal to those with similar style interests and should demonstrate a genuine passion and enthusiasm for fashion.

Blog readers enjoy visual inspirations and an aspirational blogger who is preferably, in some way, aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Ideally bloggers should differentiate themselves from other fashion bloggers. The design of the blog should be clean and minimal, offering advice and tips with inspiring visuals and a casual but professional style of writing delivering useful, honest and accurate information. While brand involvement may have a positive impact, it was found to not be of great importance.

The most significant finding is having a highly relevant fashion blog that is both meaningful and informative for its followers. The findings suggest that this can be achieved through the blog content with personal views and the style of writing being of particular importance to blog readers, though how to realize this is beyond the findings of this study and would require further research. In addition, while it may be difficult to determine an appropriate quantitative measure of blog success, a large-scale content analysis type of exercise that focuses on the blog posts of successful bloggers may help to further establish how fashion bloggers achieve highly relevant attributes.

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