

Blog Consumption: How Females Engage with Fashion in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Independent fashion bloggers are changing the fashion industry in a dynamic way, introducing spaces for women who have not traditionally been represented in mainstream fashion media. This exploratory study investigates how young adult female consumers are engaging with images on fashion blogs, compared with fashion print magazine images that have been found to lower women's self-esteem. A literature review provides a thematic foundation for the study, examining 1) how fashion has changed in the digital age; 2) what motivates fashion bloggers to blog and how they have become effective marketing tools and trend forecasters; 3) how print magazine images portray women; and 4) how female consumers engage with these images. A content analysis examines 17 of the most popular North American fashion bloggers, as rated by Signature9.com. Ten posts from each blogger reveal whether the images conform to idealized fashion print magazine images. Five bloggers serve as interview stimuli for 12 female participants, who explain their fashion media habits while examining and discussing the visual stimuli. The findings reveal factors that influence young females' engagement with fashion media and highlight what they desire when it comes to fashion images.

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1. Introduction

"[Fashion] bloggers are the next generation of media influencers. They are taking marketing and advertising budgets from leading global brands and many are at the forefront of the social media revolution, with hundreds of thousands of followers." (Paton, 2012). The Internet era has transformed the entire fashion industry (Kumala, et al. 2013, p. 20). Not only did the introduction of Web 2.0 change the way the industry presented itself, it altered the way people engage with fashion (Karaminas, 2012 p. 185). Independent fashion bloggers have significantly influenced the online fashion sphere (Rocamora, 2011 p. 408), transforming the way fashion media is consumed.

As Paton (2012) states, fashion bloggers have become prominent media influencers, and thus, my research will explore how young adult females consume the images on independent fashion blogs. In contrast to corporate blogs produced and operated by companies, independent fashion blogs will be defined here as blogs that showcase the user's unique personal style, and display their subjective opinions about the products featured on their blog. My research is essential to demonstrating how independent style bloggers are changing the fashion industry in a dynamic way, allowing women who are not traditionally accepted in the realm of fashion imageries to enter this visual scape (Rocamora, 2011).

Many popular bloggers do not conform to the model-like beauty criteria that the fashion press continues to endorse (Rocamora, 2011), suggesting that fashion consumers are looking for a change in the way fashion is promoted to them. In addition, because trends change constantly, fashion knowledge can become quickly outdated, and therefore regular trend updates have become extremely necessary (McCormick and Livett, 2012). Fashion bloggers constantly update their blogs with the newest styles, products, trends,

and ideas, becoming role models for fashion consumers due to their personal style (Kulmala et al. 2013). In analyzing what distinguishes a blog from other media sources and traditional forms of communication, Park et al. (2010) explain that blogs provide customization from the end-user's perspective; interconnectedness that allows communication between blog users and geographically separated people; and a space for the blog-user's opinions, providing a wealth of knowledge for blog-readers (p. 8). All of these features make the fashion blog a compelling area of study.

The influence that personal style blogs have on fashion media is further highlighted by the fact that many fashion print magazines have turned to blogging on their webzine editions to engage consumers (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen p. 141). Examples of this can be seen on Canadian fashion webzines such as ellecanada.com, louloumagazine.com, and fashionmagazine.com, the latter having a "Style Panel" of bloggers who share their expertise on readers' "toughest-to-wear" questions. The visual aesthetic of online magazines also reflects that of personal style blogs, with snaps of street-style looks and access to different tabs such as "fashion", "beauty", and "trends" (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen p. 143). The great success of personal style blogs has quite possibly solidified this framework as a successful platform for other types of fashion media.

Preceding studies have mainly investigated fashion blogs from the blog-owner's perspective, with a shortage of research on the blog-readers' viewpoint (Huang et al., 2007; Bronstein, 2013; Rocamora, 2011). That which has looked at bloggers' democratic capacities has been theoretically rather than empirically based (Pham, 2011; Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013). Further, although previous research has explored the ways in which females consume fashion print media, (primarily magazines; Phillips and McQuarrie,

2011; Martin and Gentry, 1997; Turner and Hamilton, 1997) there is a lack of literature pertaining to how they are engaging with online independent fashion blogs. As such, my research aims to understand how young adult females are consuming fashion blog images, and in turn, how fashion blogs are influencing and/or changing the fashion industry. Such an investigation will be accomplished through a content analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Both modes of data collection will feature fashion blogger imagery. In order to help achieve the aims of my study, I have developed three research objectives:

- (1) To explore the visual content of current fashion blogs
- (2) To find out how young adult females are engaging with fashion blog images
- (3) To examine the relationship between the consumption of fashion print media and that of independent fashion blogs

My paper will begin with a review of previous literature on independent fashion blogs and related topics. The first area looks at the ways in which the fashion industry and fashion consumers have altered in the digital age, followed by an overview of existing blog research. Since previous research has not explored how females are consuming fashion blog images, the review focuses on bloggers' motivations, bloggers' marketing and democratic capabilities, their trend forecasting abilities, and their relationships with their readers. In order to place my findings in context, the final section of the literature review explores the image content of fashion print magazines and the ways in which females consume print images.

Following the literature review, I outline my content analysis, where I examine 17 of the most popular North American fashion blogs and rate them as either conforming to or discrepant from the North American beauty ideal that permeates fashion print magazines. From there, I examine my interview results, exploring how females are engaging with and consuming fashion blog images. The results of the interview reveal

three major themes: appreciation of diversity, drivers of engagement, and signals of disconnection. A discussion then follows, linking back to my literature review. Finally, I conclude with industry implications and suggestions for future research.

The results of my study will provide valuable insight into how young adult women are engaging with fashion in the digital age, especially through independent fashion blogs. I will improve existing theory and research by adding empirical knowledge to theoretically-based studies. My research also aims to develop a framework for the reading strategies of female consumers, and will have a major role in the discipline of media studies. The exploratory analysis will also identify opportunities for future research. Further, in the realm of industry, this study stands to influence and inform bloggers and magazine producers of what readers are looking for and how they are consuming fashion in today's world. It aims to enhance knowledge and industry practice by establishing the most effective way to present fashion to consumers.

2. Literature Review

Previous researchers have neglected to address the ways in which young adult females are consuming fashion blog images. In order to approach this research topic, my literature review will be divided into three sections covering various themes. The review will begin with an examination of how fashion has evolved in the digital age, looking at both the fashion industry itself, as well as fashion consumers. Following this, I will explore current blog research, focusing on bloggers' motivations for blogging, the marketing and democratic capabilities of fashion bloggers, and fashion blogs as potential trend forecasters. I have also included a section detailing fashion bloggers' relationships with their readers. To establish females' previous engagement with fashion imagery, my review will then concentrate on content analyses of fashion print magazine images and research that has explored females' consumption of these images.

2.1 Fashion in the Digital Age

The way in which the fashion industry presents fashion, and the way that people are engaging with fashion, has changed considerably in the digital age (Karaminas, 2012). Contemporary fashion is currently expressed through visual and digital media formats (Karaminas, 2012 p. 177) – expression that was not possible before Web 2.0. Digital technologies have become increasingly influential and flexible formats for “capturing, heightening and transmitting” ideas and creativity (Karaminas, 2012 p. 178). This is fundamental in a creative world such as fashion, which thrives off ideas and inspiration. Digital platforms, such as blogs and social networks, have enabled viewers to participate in the production of fashion images, becoming part of their creative process by allowing them to submit photographs and offer opinions on fashion and style (Karaminas, 2012 p. 181). Instead of being regulated exclusively by elite groups and the

media, digital technologies have allowed the mass audience to access and contribute to the fashion system (Karaminas, 2012 p. 181). These technologies have led to a shift in the dissemination and reproduction of fashion practices and knowledge (Crewe, 2013 p. 761), significantly altering the public's engagement with and consumption of fashion images.

Digital technologies have changed the way fashion is communicated, experienced, and understood, shifting away from two-dimensional editorial magazine images to more accessible and flexible formats (Karaminas, 2012 p. 181), like the fashion blog. Fashion has become increasingly obtainable, as it is created, viewed, and reproduced concurrently across multiple locations (Karaminas, 2012 p. 181). Internet fashion sites can “coexist, mediate, link with, and augment” a large group of fashion spaces, such as the store, runway, and street (Crewe, 2013 p. 764), diffusing increased knowledge and heightened experiences for consumers. Where fashion was once only available to those who could afford to go to fashion events or were part of the fashion industry, in today's age, anyone who has access to the Internet essentially has unlimited access to fashion (Karaminas, 2012).

With increased participation in and less restricted access to the fashion system, people's shopping habits are changing (Salonen, et al. 2014 p. 87). Salonen et al. (2014) demonstrated this by conducting focus group interviews aimed at understanding what people do on fashion-related websites and why. They found four practices that characterize online fashion consumption: dreaming, expertise, information search, and being part of a community (Salonen, et al. 2014, p. 90). Where past research has deemed online fashion consumption a self-indulgent source of entertainment, Salonen et al. (2014) proved that it can be a passionate, satisfying, and time-consuming part of building

an identity, where visiting fashion sites becomes something more than a shopping transaction (Salonen, et al. 2014 p. 93). The online world creates a space where people can communicate with each other, forming communities to discuss fashion and style (Salonen, et al. 2014 p. 87). Consumers “read product reviews, follow blogs, and join online communities” in order to obtain and share their opinions with others. Salonen et al. (2014) suggest that this sense of engagement is how consumers create value, leading to fashion purchases (Salonen, et al. 2014 p. 87).

However, it is not only fashion consumers who have changed in the digital age. As the world has switched over to a digital platform, fashion companies have begun using multiple channels in order to advertise and sell their products. Even fashion magazines have turned to blogging on their webzine editions to engage consumers (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen, 2014). Engholme and Hansen-Hansen (2014) suggest that this started as a reaction to the first private fashion blogs that gained momentum and popularity in 2006 (p. 141). Online editions of print magazines now curate both traditional fashion material alongside blog-like pieces and images (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen p. 141). Additionally, webzines have begun using contributions from both professional writers *and* well-known bloggers (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen p. 141), signifying the fashion authority of bloggers in today’s age.

The visual aesthetic of webzines is also much like online “amateur” fashion blogs, where there are snaps of street-style looks and access to various tabs such as “beauty”, “fashion”, and “lifestyle” content (Engholme and Hansen-Hansen p. 143). The transformation of online magazines portrays the undeniable influence that fashion blogs have on the fashion industry in the digital age. The success of fashion blogs has made them a platform on which traditional fashion media is standing to help them strive.

Rocamora (2012) emphasizes the contrast between fashion magazines and fashion blogs, suggesting that the blogosphere has boosted fashion time. Whereas fashion was once a twice-yearly production of shows together with monthly magazines, new fashion media has insisted that fashion become accelerated to keep up with the ever-increasing “culture of speed” (Rocamora 2012, p.97). By way of the Internet and technology, fashion is now perpetually present and constantly changing, continuously updated with the goal of immediacy (Rocamora, 2012 p.97). For instance, people can now live stream fashion shows – events that were once only accessible by fashion’s elite, months before the clothing hit shelves (Rocamora, 2012 p. 97).

Rocamora (2012) also notes the seemingly endless possibilities of fashion that are available through online fashion media, specifically blogs. Fashion bloggers constantly use links, taking readers to other sites and “digital points-of-sale” in order to respond to society’s desire for immediate satisfaction (Rocamora, 2012 p. 98). Whereas flipping through a magazine puts shopping at a distance, browsing and clicking through blogs makes shopping real; the web has collapsed the “there/later” into the “here/now”, creating instant shopping and buying possibilities (Rocamora, 2012 p. 98).

2.2 Current Blog Research

With blogs becoming increasingly prominent and greatly influential in the system of online media, some researchers have begun studying the motivations of bloggers generally, and fashion bloggers in particular. Huang et al. (2007) note five main motivations of bloggers in their study on blogger behaviours: “to document their life experience, to provide commentary and opinions, to express deeply felt emotions, to articulate ideas through writing and to form and maintain community forums” (p. 473).

Since blogs are maintained by bloggers' passions, Huang et. al (2007) suggest that they are significantly shifting the world of mass media, proving to marketers that there is an abundance of fractural media space (p. 480). Media officials are no longer the only ones who control the messages conveyed to the market, and the audience has become a new system of media itself (Huang et al. 2007, p. 480). Bloggers are stepping into the place of media conglomerates, conveying their own information on their blogged-about topics, and allowing their readers to become part of the media web (Huang et al. 2007, p.480). As such, mass media has been altered and is increasingly influenced by bloggers.

Bronstein (2013) also explored personal blogger motivations, establishing that bloggers saw their blogs as being part of themselves, and used their blogs as a communication and writing tool. Her study found that when bloggers posted new information on their blogs, and received positive comments on these posts, they felt honoured and valued (Bronstein, 2013 p. 174). As such, bloggers relate to their blogs as part of their online identity, the blog becoming an emotional or positive outlet through which they can relay their feelings (Bronstein, 2013 p.175). Further, supporting her claim that blogs act as communication tools, Bronstein (2013) suggests that bloggers are motivated to blog so that they can meet people with similar interests and be part of a community (p. 175).

In exploring the motivations of fashion bloggers specifically, Rocamora (2011) theorized about the way digital computer screens allow one to look at oneself, as well as act as a platform for others to look at them. Although she did not interview blog creators, through a content analysis she asserted that personal fashion blogs are pleasurable spaces where a woman can control how she represents herself, and concurrently, affirm her identity (Rocamora, 2011). As identity is seen as a process of "becoming" rather than

“being”, personal fashion blogs act as a way for women to document the process of their identity formation through clothing (Rocamora, 2011 p. 410). Further, not only do bloggers partake in identity construction through their engagement with dress, but also their personal home pages act as a “bricolage of interests, images and links” where a sense of self is expressed (Rocamora, 2011 p. 411).

Together with fashion and blogging, Rocamora (2011) cites photography, specifically self-portrait photography, as well as the computer screen itself, as important parts of identity construction. Personal photography is a medium through which individuals confirm and explore their identity, while computer screens have become so fundamental to our daily lives that the self is no longer only played out in real space, but on the screens of our computers (Rocamora, 2011 p. 414). The virtual reality of the Internet and the computer screen as a medium allow individuals to construct and reconstruct the self, fashioning themselves just as they desire (Rocamora, 2011 p. 414).

On another note, fashion bloggers have also been studied in terms of their democratic capacities. Fashion has evolved from a business dominated by designers and industry elites, and fashion bloggers have proved that everyone, no matter what size or race, has access to stylish clothing (Pham, 2011 p. 1). Pham (2011) suggests that fashion blogs have the ability to transform neoliberal assumptions about bodily transcendence and liberation. In exploring numerous Asian-American and British-Asian fashion blogs, Pham (2011) concluded that the easily accessible and wide-spread representation of these traditionally neglected bodies stand to challenge what people see as fashionable. They are publicizing material realities of “race, gender, generation, sex, and class” that are typically left out of the fashion scape (Pham 2011).

Further, in their study on plus-size fashion bloggers, Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013) illustrate the power of the fashion blog to renegotiate cultural beauty ideals. In their analysis of five plus-size female bloggers, and over 922 of their blog posts, the authors found that these women are challenging what is seen as normative and beautiful within dominant fashion marketing (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013 p. 290). By blogging and “speaking” about their non-conforming body size, the informants in the study actively participated in a re-negotiation of bodily representation within a dominant system of thin ideals (Gurrieri and Cherrier, 2013 p. 292). Gurrieri and Cherrier’s study (2013) suggests that the distribution of beauty within fashion marketing should be reconsidered to think about those who have been excluded from the marketplace (292).

Additionally, fashion blogs have been explored in terms of their trend forecasting abilities. Looking at trend forecasting (the prediction of what motivates customers to “behave, shop and buy,”) Rickman and Cosenza (2007) note that the key to recognizing consumer demand is discovering what links a consumer to a product (607). They claim that acknowledging what blog readers want could be the next big thing in trend forecasting. In support of this, they note a blog survey released in 2006, revealing that 68% of gossip blog (in which fashion was a part) readers purchased clothing on the web, with over 48% spending in excess of \$100. Further, 15 % of these readers read three blogs daily and spent two hours each week on blogs. Since readers under the age of 25 have spending power and greater interest in fashion than older age groups, they are influential in setting trends (Rickman and Cosenza 2007 p. 609).

The central aim of marketing is to capture the attention of a consumer long enough to create an impression and a sale, and blogs have become the basis of study for future connection and communication strategies (Rickman and Cosenza p. 615).

However, for trend forecasting through fashion blogs to become a reality, there must be certain fundamental elements in place. For example, an abundant communication of fashion in structured blogs, rich research conditions to record the cultural, behavioural, and socio-economical implications over time for both the blog and the blogger, and the data collected from blogs must be historical, have cycles, and be interval in nature (617). Fashion blogs may just have the capability to be effective trend forecasters.

Bloggers have also been studied in terms of their marketing abilities and influence on fashion blog readers. In their study that explored naturally occurring eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) versus market influenced eWOM in fashion blogs, Kulmala et al. (2013) found that bloggers and their readers shared tips and advice on diverse topics such as experiences, product alternatives, favourite shops, and product details. They discovered that bloggers tend to steer away from posting negative reviews of brands and products as this could create a negative atmosphere in the blog (Kulmala, et al. 2013 p. 28). However, if a blogger decides not to buy a certain product and shares this with her readers, many readers end up making the same decision, fortifying the blogger as a fashion opinion leader (Kulmala et al. 2013).

At the core of their research, Kumala et al. (2013) found that portraying personal style is fundamental for fashion bloggers. As such, for marketing through bloggers to be effective, the marketed items, designers, or retailers must fit the blogger's personal style. When incorporating brands and designers into their posts, market-influenced eWOM is usually written by bloggers to resemble natural occurring eWOM (Kumala et al. 2013). For example, bloggers will wear a piece of clothing that a marketer has sent to them in a daily outfit post. To market this product successfully, Kumala et. al (2013) stress that bloggers need to find a balance between what the audience expects (authenticity and

truthfulness) and what the marketer expects (brand promotion). And again, marketing will only be successful if bloggers are promoting items that suit their recognized personal style (Kumala et al. 2013).

Additionally, as blogs have become primary destinations amongst Web users, influential bloggers have themselves become a type of online idol (Colliander and Dalhen, 2011 p. 313). In their study that looked at the difference between brand name products presented in fashion blogs and brand name products presented in online fashion magazines, Colliander and Dalhen (2011) found that readers had a more positive reaction to publicity in blogs and showed a higher intent to purchase products displayed therein. This suggests that fashion blogs have become an important and successful media outlet to promote and publicize fashion brands. Colliander and Dalhen (2011) propose that this is due to viewers developing a relationship with the bloggers they follow and seeing them as a reliable and unbiased source of knowledge and information on brands and products (p. 314).

The study conducted by Colliander and Dalhen found that bloggers' effects on and relationships with readers are mediated by para-social interaction, described as an illusion of a face-to face relationship with a media performer (p. 314). Since bloggers tend to post on their blogs daily, blog readers gain repeated exposure to them and begin to view them as friends (Colliander and Dalhen, 2011 p. 314). Therefore, as long as bloggers genuinely follow brands, their readers form relationships with the brands as well (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011). However, the authors also highlight the importance of the blogger's transparency and their unbiased opinions on brands. For readers to form their own relationships with bloggers, they must feel as though the relationship between the blogger and their promoted brands is genuine (Colliander, 2011 p. 319).

Prior research has developed considerable knowledge about the producers of independent fashion blogs; however, there has been little established in terms of how young adult females consume and engage with blogs. Pham (2011), along with, Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013), suggest that independent fashion blogs are democratic; they stand to challenge fashion imagery that traditionally neglects certain body types. However, there is a lack of empirical research because these researchers did not interview fashion blog users about their perceptions and understandings. To further research, scholars can explore how users engage with independent fashion blogs. My research intends to meet this aim.

2.3 Content Analyses of Fashion Print Magazines

There has been extensive research conducted on fashion print magazines, including many content analyses that look at who is represented in these publications and how. Prior research concludes that stereotyping is a prevalent issue in fashion magazine advertisements. Sengupta (2006) looked at representations of Black, East-Asian, and White women in magazines, and established that although the representation of Black models has been steadily increasing over time, there was a significant under-representation of East-Asian and South-Asian models in the sampled ads (805).

Their study evolved from an analysis of the numerical representation of minority portrayals in teen magazines to an analysis of the meanings that were attached to minority females by advertisers (Sengupta, 2006). Among their results, they found that White women were most frequently coded as the Classic/Feminine type (25.8%), while Black women were coded as such less frequently at 18.2%, and East-Asian women were excluded from this category altogether (Sengupta, 2006 p. 804). East-Asian women were also excluded from the Sensual/Sexy category and the Trendy category, with 100% of

East-Asian models assigned to the Casual/Sporty advertisement category (Sengupta, 2006 p. 804).

The analysis by Sengupta (2006) revealed that East-Asian models were absent from any beauty or clothing advertisements but appeared most frequently in technology advertisements. East-Asian models were also featured more in background roles than White and Black women, who were highlighted in feature roles. Such a practice signifies to the public that East-Asian women may have no interest in beauty and fashion products and that they may not be financially savvy enough to purchase the promoted products (Sengupta, 2006 p. 805). This also acts as a damaging stereotype for young minority women, as young women are constantly looking to teen magazines to provide them with definitions of the ideal woman and her role in society (Sengupta, 2006 p. 805). This issue is signified by Frisby (2004) who notes that ethnic group members are more likely to compare themselves to those who share a common characteristic with in-group rather than out-group members.

Also focusing on teen magazines and the topic of stereotyping, Massoni (2004) explored Seventeen magazine, analyzing its gendering of Western adolescent females and the occupational world embedded in the magazine. Her in-depth content analysis revealed that men dominated 70% of the important and intelligible occupational positions, while female jobs were restricted to those regarding “beauty, youth and/or the desire to serve” (Massoni, 2004 p. 62). These gender stereotypical jobs portray a message to the magazine’s target market, young girls, that is detrimental to their sense of self (Massoni, 2004 p. 62).

Additionally, manipulation has been cited as a prevalent issue in fashion magazines (Moeran 2010). In Moeran’s (2010) extensive 15-year study on popular

international fashion magazines, including Elle, Vogue, and Marie Claire, it was determined that magazine editors adopt a “technology of enchantment” as a means of exercising control over their readers, suggesting that readers of fashion magazines are manipulated into consuming products. This particular study looked at beauty, which is inextricably linked to fashion (Moeran, 2010 p. 492), in popular print magazines. Together, beauty and makeup have been advertised as something that should be learned and practiced by all women, and further, beauty dilemmas have been found to be elements that unite all women (Moeran, 2010).

Moeran (2010) suggests that this train of thought, simultaneously with magazine language, has resulted in women being persuaded to consume beauty products that will help them attain their goal of attraction and combat the beauty dilemmas they are faced with. In her study, Moeran (2010) established that the language that magazines and their advertisements use was permeated with a “magical power”, and as such, women consumed beauty products in advertisements even when they were conscious of the fact that they were being manipulated.

2.4 Consumer Response to Fashion Print Magazines

Along with extensive content analyses, there is also considerable literature that explores how female consumers engage with the images and ads in print magazines. Martin and Gentry (1997) used social comparison theory to explore how young girls compare their physical attractiveness with that of beautiful advertising models. Their study held consistent with social comparison theory predictions, as female pre-adolescents’ and adolescents’ self perceptions of physical attractiveness were lowered when participants evaluated themselves in relation to models in ads (Martin and Gentry, 1997 p. 28). However, they found that when participants compared themselves to ads for

self-improvement, rather than self-evaluation, comparisons to models temporarily raised their self-perceptions and self-esteem (29). Their study suggests that motives play an important role as to whether participants' self-esteem is lowered; however, a motive for self-improvement in grade six seems problematic in itself.

Further, Turner and Hamilton (1997) concluded that fashion magazine images led to negative female body perceptions. Specifically, study participants who were conditioned with fashion magazines noted greater dissatisfaction with their bodies and frustration about their weight, in comparison to those who were conditioned with news magazines. As stimuli, the study used four fashion magazines that were known for showcasing the thin fashion ideal, including *Vogue* and *Elle*, and news magazines such as *Time* and *Business Week*. The participants who viewed fashion magazines showcased a greater preoccupation with being thin, demonstrating the role of fashion media in shaping societal perceptions of the female body (Turner and Hamilton, 1997). Further, their results indicated that the participants who looked at fashion magazines noted a fear about deviating from the thin standard (Turner and Hamilton, 1997). Many fashion bloggers do not fit into this slim ideal (Rocamora, 2011) and my research aims to grasp if this is changing the way females feel about themselves.

However, the implications from these analyses do not correspond with a recent study on women's perceptions of fashion magazine images. Phillips and McQuarrie (2011) conducted a study that challenged the prevailing view that idealized images in fashion magazines result in negative responses and lower self-image. This study found that women reported mostly positive emotions in their response to engaging with fashion advertising, noting feelings of creativity, stimulation, and inspiration (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2011 p. 117). Participants in their study noted a high degree of excitement

and engagement while examining fashion ads, and some noted inspiration to try something new (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2011).

Phillips and McQuarrie's (2011) study found that women experienced greater negative responses to beauty advertisements that featured beautiful women with stunning features. Women spent less time with these ads and reported mixed emotions to them, prompting the researchers to suggest that the prevailing view that women experience negative self-comparison from idealized imagery may very well be narrowed to their exposure to beauty ads rather than fashion ads (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2011).

Although much of the existing research magnifies the negative aspects of the fashion industry, Phillips and McQuarrie (2011) advanced a new perspective on the way females are consuming fashion print magazine images. By researching how young adult females are consuming independent fashion blog images, I explore how women's consumption of fashion print images compares to their consumption of blogs. My study looks at how the content differs between the two, and how this influences readers' experience.

3. Methodology: Content Analysis

My study used Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to develop a framework for how female consumers read fashion blog images. I used two research methods in the formation of this framework: content analysis and semi-structured interviews. In this chapter I break down my content analysis and the findings that surfaced from the examination.

3.1 Blogger imagery in North American independent style blogs

The content analysis aimed to uncover the unique features of independent fashion blogs and helped shape the interview questions. The primary goal of the content analysis was to uncover which independent fashion blogs were consistent with or discrepant from fashion print magazine images. These images consisted primarily of a narrow beauty ideal where gorgeous models are surrounded by luxurious things in upscale settings (Phillip and McQuarrie, 2011 p.103). The focus of the blog image examination therefore, was on blogger appearance, blogger behavior (e.g. walking, smiling, playing with hair, touching their bags), and blog setting. I chose these as the initial categories because past research has deemed them successful. They come from Phillips and McQuarrie's (2011) analysis of print magazines, which used model appearance, model behavior, and setting of magazine advertisements in Vogue and Vanity Fair for their content analysis (p. 103). I also added 'Image quality' as a category as throughout the analysis it was clear that it was an important aspect of the photos. 'Image quality' looked at whether each image was consistent with edited, sharp and high quality images that are customary in North American print magazines.

3.2 Sample

The analysis examined 17 of the most influential independent fashion blogs in North

America. Since a complete and official directory of blogs does not exist, a list of “most influential blogs” was secured through an alternate ranking system. The sample came from Signature9.com, a site that developed an index of the 99 Most Influential Fashion and Beauty Blogs on the web. The system started with an index of 20,000 recently updated fashion and beauty blogs from around the world, eliminating abandoned or infrequently updated blogs with each cycle. The data was then crunched, and using link and social media sharing data, a score was assigned to each blog that indicated general content quality, popularity, and buzz. The list is a comprehensive and objectively measured guide to fashion media. Since the Signature9 list includes independent style and beauty blogs as well as fashion and beauty news sites from all over the world, only North American independent fashion blogs in which the bloggers post daily personal outfits were chosen for this sample.

Consequently, 17 out of the 99 Most Influential Fashion and Beauty Blogs as ranked by Signature9’s Influence Rating System were used. The analysis looked at the most recent ten personal style posts published by each blogger starting from September 29, 2014, and explored how each fit into the four different categories. Posts where the blogger was not present (e.g. a clothing collage post) were excluded from the analysis. A total of 170 blog posts were coded as explained below.

3.3 Coding

I scored each blog post as either conforming to or discrepant from the conventional, high quality fashion print magazine images that present gorgeous models with luxury things in upscale settings (Phillip and McQuarrie, 2011 p.103). Multiple photos in a blog post were scored together, as bloggers typically wear the same outfit in similar settings for daily posts. Posts that included more than one outfit *and* setting were scored separately. A

mark from 1 to 5 was given for each post, 1 being the most discrepant from idealized images and 5 being the most conforming to ideal images. Table 1 shows how these scores were determined. Although discrepancy and conformation is subjective, all posts were analyzed using the same outline, making the ranking system as objective as possible.

In defining a post as conforming to or discrepant from conventional North American beauty ideals, I examined (a) blogger appearance (did they conform to the prevailing ideal of women being thin, Caucasian or exotic, attractive, young?); (b) blogger behaviour (eg. walking, smiling, playing with hair- posts were only scored as discrepant if the blogger was behaving in a way that was undesirable such as giving the middle finger); (c) blog post setting (did the setting seem luxurious? garage backdrops were deemed discrepant while beaches or upscale building backdrops were scored as conforming); and (d) image quality (images were coded as conforming if they were sharp and high quality, and were coded as discrepant if they looked dull or washed out).

Figures 1 and 3 present examples of images from blog posts coded as conforming to North American beauty ideals and Figures 2 and 4 provide examples of images from blog posts coded as discrepant from these ideals. Figure 1 was coded as “completely conforming” to the prevailing view, as none of the four categories were deemed discrepant. The blogger is attractive and exotic, young and thin. She is not behaving in an undesirable way and there is a chic, luxurious looking building in the background. The image is high quality and sharp. Images such as these were coded as conforming to typical beauty ideals that could be deemed aspirational, like those present in print magazine images and ads (Phillip and McQuarrie, 2011 p.103).

Figure 2 was coded as mostly discrepant from the prevailing view. Although the blogger’s behaviour was coded as conforming, all other categories were deemed

discrepant. The blogger is attractive, but she is plus size- an image that is not idealized in prevalent print magazines. The setting is not luxurious as it looks like the images were taken in a parking lot and the images also look washed out, explaining the discrepant image quality score. Since this study deals with street style bloggers, many of the settings were deemed discrepant, as many images were taken on neighbourhood streets or in front of fences or garages.

1 - fully discrepant (D) from cultural beauty ideals	all categories are discrepant
2 - mostly discrepant from cultural beauty ideals	3 out of 4 categories are discrepant
3 - somewhat discrepant form cultural beauty ideals	2 out of 4 categories are discrepant
4 - mostly conforming (C) to cultural beauty ideals	1 out of 4 categories are discrepant
5 - fully conforming to cultural beauty ideals	none of the categories are discrepant

Table 1. Ranking System



Figure 1. Fashion Toast



Figure 2. Gabi Fresh



Figure 3. Karla's Closet, Camila Coelho, & Fashion Squad



Figure 4. ...love Maegan, Keiko Lynn, & Sea of Shoes

4. Findings: Content Analysis

Each of the ten blog posts for all 17 bloggers were scored on a scale from 1 to 5, presenting a potential final score of 50. Each post was coded deeply, looking closely at each image in the post to gain a good understanding of what the blogger wanted to portray through the images.

4.1 Category Coding

While the behavior and image quality categories were easier to code, the appearance and setting categories proved more demanding. All of the bloggers scored as conforming in the behavior category, as none of them presented images that were distasteful, vulgar, or offensive. Each of the bloggers posted photos of posed and candid everyday shots, walking down a street or beach, for instance. All of their behaviours were deemed acceptable, natural, and even sometimes playful. Not a single post was deemed discrepant in this category. Image quality was also simple to score. Either the images looked of high quality, bright and sharp, or more dull and washed out. Most of the photos scored conforming in this category, but there were some that were coded as discrepant.

Setting was more difficult to code, as sometimes the image quality tended to blend with this category. For example, if there was a photo of a blogger on a street that had very high image quality, it could make the setting seem more luxurious, or if the image quality appeared dull for an image on a beach, it would make the setting seem less luxurious. Settings were coded as conforming to or discrepant from luxurious settings found in print magazines, regardless of the image quality. When it came to deciding whether, say, a building was luxurious, all of the surroundings were taken into consideration. Was there gold on the building? Did it have large beams? Did it look like it was in a luxurious city like London, England, or Monaco? Settings such as a

neighbourhood street, parking lot, or garage were coded as discrepant. Settings such as the beach and luxurious building backdrops were deemed conforming. These bloggers are street style bloggers, and as such, many settings ended up being coded as discrepant.

Appearance was the most challenging to code. The prominent North American beauty ideal is a white, thin, young, attractive female, with close to perfect attributes, who is usually blonde. Bloggers present a great range and mix of this beauty ideal. Some are white, but not thin, some are thin but not white, others are Asian and small, or Asian and plus-size. Some are white redheads, who also do not fit the prominent ideal. Bloggers were coded as conforming if they fit all or almost all of the above attributes. For instance, if the blogger was white, thin, young, and attractive they were coded as conforming. Brunettes and redheads were coded as conforming if they had those other attributes as well.

Almost all Asian bloggers were scored as discrepant, as Asians are very seldom portrayed as the North American beauty ideal (Salonen, 2014). Rumi Neely of Fashion Toast was coded as conforming, as she is a mixed Caucasian/Asian who is very attractive and exotic, something that is more highly represented in print magazines. Bloggers were coded as discrepant if they were plus-size, if it was clear that they were older, if they were pregnant or if they had a unique look, for example one of the bloggers (Keiko Lynn) had blue hair and tattoos up and down her arms. All of these attributes are not ones you regularly find in traditional fashion media.

4.2 Call for Change

The content analysis found that bloggers (and popular ones at that) are indeed opening a space for women who are left out of fashion print media and magazines.

Whereas print was once our only way to obtain fashion information (Karaminas, 2012),

blogs have introduced more accessible fashion with a necessary range of diversity.

Anything coded as discrepant in this analysis signaled a change in the world of fashion.

The final overall scores ranged from 27 to 48, with the average score being approximately 35/50. Out of the 17 bloggers, eight of their appearances were scored as conforming to prevalent beauty ideals. Even if the blogger was attractive, if she was plus size, looked older, or was of a race that is not prevalent in North American print magazine images, her appearance was scored as discrepant. Appendices 1 to 5 provide the images and coding conclusions that were drawn for the five bloggers used as stimuli for interviews in the study. All of the 17 bloggers were scored and commented on using the outline provided in the appendices.

The fact that over half of the most popular North American bloggers do not conform to the prevalent beauty ideal portrayed in fashion print magazines speaks volumes to the changes in the current fashion scape. The top world bloggers are not only tall, thin and Caucasian, but span different ethnicities, dress sizes, hair colours and heights. This information stands to be extremely significant. It suggests that readers desire a greater range of beauty and style in their every day fashion consumption. They are not only looking for the ideal beauty that is regularly portrayed by fashion print magazines; this information shows that they are searching for something more. Not everyone is white and thin with perfect skin, and this analysis suggests that women are looking to engage with people to whom they can relate.

4.3 Ethnic Breakdown

My content analysis revealed that ten of the most popular North American bloggers analyzed were Caucasian, five bloggers were Asian and two were Spanish. Chart 1 shows the breakdown of blogger ethnicities. Caucasian was the most prominent

race out of the seventeen bloggers, however it is important to point out that not all Caucasian bloggers were coded as conforming. If a blogger was Caucasian and pregnant, Caucasian and of an older age or Caucasian with unique features such as blue hair, her appearance was coded as discrepant. An interesting finding was that none of the bloggers were African-American. Sengupta's (2006) study found that African-American women are increasingly represented in North American fashion print magazine advertisements, while Asian women are the least represented. In the blogosphere it seems as though the opposite is occurring, as almost 30% of the most popular North American bloggers analyzed in this study were Asian. Perhaps the fact that Asians are blatantly under-represented in traditional fashion print media (Sengupta, 2006) has resulted in them taking to alternative outlets to engage with fashion.

The content analysis indicated that over half of the most popular North American fashion bloggers' appearances do not conform to the narrow beauty ideals presented in fashion print magazines. This suggests that readers are looking for a more diverse representation of beauty in fashion images. Most of the blog post settings were not very luxurious and so were scored as discrepant from the idealized and upscale settings found in most print magazines. The analysis proves that fashion blog images are quite dissimilar to previously examined images in fashion print magazines, and the popularity of these blogs deserves an explanation as to what makes readers so interested in engaging with them. Therefore, I next consider how and why women consume and engage with fashion blog images.

4.4 Interview Stimuli

To aid with the interview section of my study, the three bloggers whose posts were most conforming with prevalent images and the two bloggers whose posts were

least conforming, were chosen as stimuli for the interview questions. If there was more than one blogger that had the same score and fell into the top or bottom, the bloggers' names were put into a hat and whichever name was pulled was used for the interview.

The blog post images from each blogger that were chosen for the interview stimuli were also chosen at random.

Blogger	Score	Appearance
Cupcakes and Cashmere	33/50	Conforming
Camila Coelho (Super Vaidosa)	41/50	Conforming
Atlantic Pacific	39/50	Conforming
Fashion Toast	48/50	Conforming
Sea of Shoes	34/50	Discrepant
Sincerely Jules	32/40	Discrepant
Wendy's Lookbook	37/50	Discrepant
Song of Style	33/50	Discrepant
What I Wore	30/50	Discrepant
...love Meagan	27/50	Discrepant
Gabi Fresh	29/50	Discrepant
The Glamourai	38/50	Conforming
Karla's Closet	39/50	Conforming
Keiko Lynn	30/50	Discrepant
The College Prepster	36/50	Conforming
Dulce Candy	30/50	Discrepant
Fashion Squad	38/50	Conforming

Table 2. Bloggers' post scores and appearance ratings

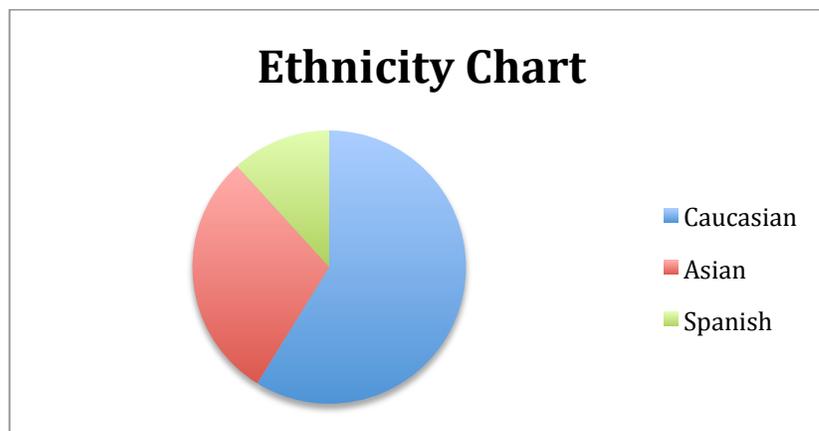


Chart 1. Blogger Ethnicity Breakdown

5. Methodology: Interviews

Following the content analysis, five independent fashion blogs were used for interviews with 12 female consumers between the ages of 21 and 25. Past research has shown that 12 to 15 interviews allows for theoretical saturation to be achieved (Guest et al. 2006). The three blogs that conformed most to cultural beauty ideals, and the two blogs that conformed least (as found through the content analysis) were used as the stimuli for the interviews.

The interview sample was collected through a snowball method. I sent recruitment requests through my professional and personal network as well as posted on social media. A purposive sample (Lincoln and Guba 1985) was selected; I aimed to include women who represented a wide range of demographic traits (e.g., dress size, race and sexual orientation) in order to acquire the greatest variety of responses and develop a robust understanding of fashion blog consumption. Figure 1 details the participant demographics. To ensure participants were interested in fashion, recruitment requests asked that only females who read fashion blogs on a regular basis contact me to participate.

The interviews were conducted in two stages. The first was the introductory stage that explored the participants' consumption of fashion media, including print magazine habits and blog consumption. In this stage participants were asked what type of fashion media they enjoy most, how often they read fashion print magazines and how often they read fashion blogs. The second stage used the five bloggers as stimuli and participants were asked questions about them to uncover what they think and feel. In the second stage, participants were asked to describe the feelings, sensations and impressions they got from the images, what they thought the blogger was trying to portray through the images, what

they would do/think when seeing these blog images, and what aspects of the images they would notice first or linger on. Participants were emailed follow-up demographic questions. All interviews were coded and transcribed.

The transcription analysis followed the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994), employing data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification conclusions. After I transcribed the interviews, I coded them with descriptive labels and four categories emerged: diversity, visual stimulation, inspiration, and disengagement. Each of the categories were then turned into themes and sub-themes as they were refined and linked together. After the coding for all 12 interviews was completed, clear patterns surfaced and conclusions were evident, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The results of these interviews illustrate how young adult females are engaging with and consuming fashion blog images.

Participant	Age	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity
Participant 1	24	Bi Sexual	Caucasian
Participant 2	24	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Participant 3	23	Heterosexual	Iranian
Participant 4	24	Heterosexual	Mixed
Participant 5	21	Heterosexual	Caucasian/Asian
Participant 6	24	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Participant 7	23	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Participant 8	24	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Participant 9	25	Heterosexual	Caucasian/European
Participant 10	23	Gay	Caucasian/Asian
Participant 11	23	Heterosexual	Caucasian
Participant 12	25	Gay	Caucasian

Figure 1: Participant Demographic Information.

6. Findings: Interviews

The analysis of interviews revealed that young adult women consume fashion blogs as sources of diverse inspiration that are not often found in traditional fashion media, while also looking to blogs for visual stimulation and styling options. The findings were grouped into three themes. The first theme, *appreciation for diversity*, reveals the types of diversity women are finding in fashion blogs. The second theme, *drivers of engagement*, outlines what women are specifically seeking in fashion blogs and which elements of blog images interest them most. The final theme, *signals of disconnection*, details the elements of fashion blogs that women find to be limiting and problematic.

1. *Appreciation of Diversity*

The interviews showed that participants frequently visit independent fashion blogs because they provide a distinct source of information and inspiration, including a diversity of women and fashion styles. Consuming fashion blog images results in women feeling inspired and engaged on a daily basis, and often results in their replication of bloggers' outfits.

Representation of different women

Participants noticed the range of women present in the interview stimuli and noted that compared to fashion print magazines, the fashion blogosphere has a varied representation of women in general. One woman explained:

“Anyone can create a blog, you get a lot better representation of the general public...there's a lot more freedom from the stereotype that's in print magazines, it's kind of like expectation to look a certain way, whereas in a blog it's kind of like free reign...if you don't want to look at a person because you're like oh that's not my body type, you can kind of look away from that, but in print it's just there

and it's in your face, which is kind of different, then you have this kind of exposure to pick what you really want to see or not."

The diversity of women in fashion media is encouraging and refreshing to participants who consume fashion images regularly. In analyzing the plus size blogger (Gabi Fresh), one participant exclaimed: "automatically you're seeing a mixed race women who is not size zero and... does make an outfit work for her body type and it's showing that any body type can work with clothes to make great style." In examining the same blogger, another woman said: "it's also nice she doesn't have a traditional fashion photography body type, which is refreshing." Statements such as these solidify that women recognize the lack of diversity in traditional fashion media and further suggest that they are seeking a greater representational range of women in their current fashion image consumption.

Participants revealed irritation at the lack of representation of different women and body sizes within traditional print magazines. One participant said: "These images are not something you would find in a mainstream fashion magazine because they have very poor representation of anything that is not size zero and six feet tall." As for women being inspired by fashion imagery, women felt the need to associate with the body size of the model/blogger in order to feel a higher level of stimulation and engagement with the image. Seeing a blogger with a similar body type to their own led to participants engaging more and wanting to see more of their outfits. Examining the plus-size blogger, one woman remarked:

"I think that because she's not necessarily the typical person in fashion, like stereotypically fashion's associated with models being so thin and I would probably, maybe say, 'oh what else has she got on?' you know what I mean? Like I'm not stick thin myself so some of those girls [stimuli] I'd be like, meh,

I like it but I don't think it'd look good on me, but maybe something she has on I'd be like kay, or maybe something new, a way to accessorize or something."

When women see themselves represented in fashion imagery, they are more likely to engage in a positive and inspired way. The diverse representation of women in fashion blogs is refreshing and motivating for women who have noticed a lack of their body size depicted in traditional fashion media, and specifically fashion print magazines.

Participants also noted segregation as an issue that surfaces in fashion print magazines, particularly when it comes to portraying non-typical fashion bodies, as opposed to blogs, where you are exposed to a greater range of women and body sizes. One participant exclaimed:

"Compared to print, I feel like this is a lot better representation of the general public, like these 5 [stimuli], whereas print, sometimes they throw it in now but it's like a Dove ad...or sometimes they'll throw it in as the curvy girl, so it's a segregation again, versus this is kind of a bit of everything, like there's representation for different ages, different body shapes between all of them."

There is no doubt that the greater exposure to a wider variety of women and bodies through fashion blogs is leading to increased engagement and inspiration for women consuming fashion imagery.

Representation of different styles

Participants recognize that their personal style has become highly represented in today's fashion media, especially through fashion blogs. The Internet has created a space where people can search for what they want on the one hand, while on the other, bloggers can portray different styles and aesthetics that weren't always available through other types of fashion media. The range of different styles available through fashion blogs has opened a

space for women who did not see themselves or their styles represented previously in traditional fashion imagery. One woman remarked:

“I think that with the Internet and social media and with people from any walk of life being able to start a fashion blog or any type of lifestyle blog, that the range of styles and the range of fashion that you come across, the opportunities to express yourself are kind of endless. So, you see you know, queer culture being represented in social media or on blogs and I think that is really cool and really important and yeah, I think individuals that don’t relate to mainstream fashion are finding ways to express themselves and are being influenced by these alternative style blogs and websites and I think that’s super cool.”

Women are inspired and influenced by fashion bloggers that have similar styles to their own, using these blogs to form future style aspirations. One participant noted:

“Something interesting about fashion media is that you like to see some of your style in what you’re looking for on the blog website, so if I see a certain Tumblr or Instagram account that dresses really similar to me and I see different ways of dressing on their accounts, I’ll replicate or definitely be influenced by the accounts that I feel also represent me, so it’s like me but with more of a creative flair.”

Participants compared the representation of different styles found in fashion blogs to that of fashion print magazines, indicating their attraction to fashion imagery that is more in tune with their personal style. One woman said: “[The blogosphere] is a lot more accessible, it’s more like I can see people wearing things that I would wear, which is really nice because that’s not what I go to Vogue for.” Another woman remarked: “I use to look at print magazines a lot more...[and] it just felt kind of the same, whereas now if

you're looking online or using your phone, it's tailored to your own specific style and you can follow people you want to follow."

With fashion print magazines, creative individuals who are high up in the industry produce the fashion imagery and styling. Although this creates amazing visual stimulation and can act as a creative outlet for women, it is not always relatable to their daily lives. One participant noted the sense of freedom that she feels now that she sees her style represented in fashion imagery through blogs. She exclaimed:

"You have more choice and there is more representation of different body types, different women, a lot of different styles. It's almost like the gatekeepers of fashion are just removed, you know, like you can still access those mainstream outlets that I use to read in print, but yeah there's just so much more freedom."

The fashion blogosphere has created a space for women that offers a greater representation of body types alongside a greater representation of fashion styles. My results indicate that the latter is just as essential for positive consumer engagement. Women are able to find numerous sources of style inspiration through fashion blogs that influence their daily personal style.

Diversity of Inspiration

From mimicking bloggers' outfits to reaching beyond their style comfort zones, females are discovering diverse sources of inspiration through fashion blog imagery. Fashion bloggers provide consistent style motivation for women who engage with fashion imagery on a regular basis. Looking at the first blogger (Atlantic Pacific) used as interview stimuli, one participant stated:

"It does make me feel inspired, it makes me want to try something new just because I wouldn't have necessarily thought to put a lot of these things

together...now when I look for my own wardrobe, it's like okay maybe I would have thought that that sweater wouldn't go with that shirt initially, now I'm like okay expand beyond what you think is your boundary."

Women want to be challenged to create increasingly stylish outfits, and they use bloggers as a major source of influence. One woman remarked: "I've gone so far as having a pair of pants that the blogger has that I have the same ones, and I see the way she styles it and I like it so I try that too, so I definitely emulate their style sometimes." Another woman said: "Some of the blogs I saw would show an item and be like this is how you can wear it and I'd see if I had [it] and mimic what they were showing...it helped me figure out different things about what I was going to wear."

Since fashion media has become so accessible, women are looking for fashion inspiration on a daily basis, to help them figure out what they are going to wear or how to style daily outfits. Fashion blogs have become a significant platform for women who are looking to gain style inspiration. One participant explained: "that's what I love about blogging, like yeah you can put on clothes everyday or you can do what this girl is doing and you can put on clothes and be like, 'I look so good' and just rock it all day." Another women stated: "you know, that's part of the reason people like looking at blogs, to try and put new outfit ideas together themselves." Women are not just looking to blogs for a source of visual stimulation and creativity, but are in fact using fashion bloggers as a source of imitation and emulation, to reach the personal style that they are aspiring to attain on a daily basis. Talking about her daily habits, one participant remarked:

"I think that there's more updates [on blogs], whereas magazines you get a monthly issue, you know, it comes out not so often so you might want to be

inspired on a daily basis so you'll be like I don't know what to wear today so you'll just go on a blog or go on Instagram.”

2. Drivers of Engagement

Participants are looking to fashion blogs to acquire different ways of styling outfits, and they strongly desire fine details and close-up shots of accessories to assist them with this. They also desire more images compared to text, as visual stimulation was found to be a major aspect of their online fashion consumption. In addition, participants cited fashion image consumption as a creative outlet and source of escape from their everyday lives.

All in the details

When women look at fashion blog images they are not always looking for a new outfit to wear, but are also learning different ways to accessorize outfits and seeking inspiration on things such as what colour palettes work well together. They are strongly influenced by the different details that the blogger puts into their online looks. One participant claimed: “I don't really look at blogs for clothing as I do style, something that will go with something else. Clothing is more if I try it on, for blogs it's more accessories or what I would add on to something.” Another participant said:

“Since I'm looking at it [blogs] everyday, I'm not looking for something new to wear as an outfit, I'm looking more for like colour palette, and the way people have accessorized things in different ways to give a day to night look or just accessorize things using colours you usually wouldn't think of, like nail polish, jewelry, that kind of thing.”

When participants were asked how they would read each blog image, thereby revealing which elements of the photos they noticed first or would linger on, the majority talked about the up-close details and styling of accessories as elements that caught their eye.

When analyzing one of the bloggers, one woman said: “I like that she’s got a focus on her main pieces, like she’s got the big photo of her clutch and her rings, you can see the way she’s used nail polish and what colour she’s pairing everything with.” Another woman remarked: “I think the close up pictures are something that I’d linger on more. Um, same with like any picture that looks more natural, I feel like I’d be more drawn to.”

Accessories, how to use accessories to enhance an outfit, and fine details of an outfit itself, have become a major source of interest for women who look at fashion blogs, suggesting an important focus for online fashion image creators. The close-up images of bloggers’ outfits stuck out to participants, and they seemed to prefer them to the other images presented. One participant exclaimed: “I wanna stay on this again, this up close, because the detail of the skirt, you can see her rings, the purse a little better, the colour of her nails, I think I’m drawn more to things you can see the detail on.” In another analysis, a participant said:

“For me it’s the accessories, she’s got a chunky watch on, a thumb ring on, and that’s what changes too, like she has the heels that go into running shoes, so I feel like that’s kind of the focus, like the way she’s accessorized, she’s used her glasses, her bag, with the shoes, with the hair, and the jewelry, so that’s kind of what sticks out for me, the way she’s accessorized it.”

This suggests that women are seeking new forms of inspiration, looking for versatile ways to create daily looks. Details such as colours and accessories are a significant part of women’s styling decisions.

Content Preference

Women desire visual stimulation when consuming fashion online, and specifically when consuming fashion blogs. Most of the participants in this study noted that they were less

focused on the writing content accompanying blog images than the images themselves, as these provide visual stimulation, leading to ideas and inspiration. When talking about what she looks for in fashion, one participant explained:

“It’s one hundred percent the visual part I’m going for, like I love reading what’s in magazines but that’s very secondary and that’s why I love personal fashion blogs so much as well because it’s just pictures usually and that’s all I’m looking for, I don’t even want the opinion of the picture.”

When women are looking at fashion sources online, they want the information and writing to be short and concise. They are stimulated by images and visual curation, desiring a bombardment of images in their fashion consumption practices. Since many fashion blogs are made up of imagery with small snippets of information on what the outfit is and where they wore it, perhaps this explains the popularity of this type of fashion media. One of the women remarked: “I like short snippets of information when I’m reading online. I want everything to be short and visual, I don’t know why but when I’m reading print magazines I don’t mind reading long articles, but I don’t like reading them online.” Another participant went on to talk about social media site Pinterest, saying:

“I used to like fashion blogs a lot, now I like Pinterest and companies for example, Free People or Topshop or certain brands that I like that have Pinterest boards, I like to consume, I like the visual curation of images... I don’t often read content or read stuff about fashion online, mostly I just look at people’s outfits.”

Women are affected and inspired by visuals when it comes to fashion. The accessibility and quick information that fashion blogs provide, along with their large and multiple images, is in tune with women’s online fashion desires. However, there are always

exceptions, and some participants did claim that they preferred more written content in online fashion media. One woman remarked: “Sometimes, with online blogs it’s too much imagery, not enough content and I feel like because there’s so many blogs...it kind of gets boring after a while just looking at images, so I definitely prefer more content and news and cultural stuff.” Another woman noted that she prefers visual stimulation with a compilation of images, but said that bloggers often post too many pictures of the same outfit. She stated:

“I think there are too many images of the same look. So whenever I go on fashion blogs and what I don’t like about them again, and what I like about the compilation of tumblr blogs, they pick out one best image. Why do you have to translate this look in five different ways, like okay two or three is okay but this one and then this one, what new information can you get from it? Oh the heels and the shoes are different but whatever it’s boring, at the end of the day it’s just boring.”

Fashion blogs do provide the visual stimulation craved by female readers; however, perhaps they would benefit from cutting down the number of similar looks posted on their blogs, so that it does not become repetitive and “boring.”

Creative Outlet

Women use fashion media as a creative outlet and source of escape from their everyday lives. Under this topic, women talked about fashion blogs, social media, and fashion print magazines as outlets for creativity. When speaking about fashion print magazines, one participant explained: “I’m not very creative in my job and in my life I don’t do a lot of creative things, so I guess I enjoy that...it makes me happy, it’s inspiring...I just think the images are really beautiful.” Speaking about fashion blogs, one woman remarked: “I

don't look at fashion blogs always wanting the things that I would wear. The one's that I frequent are things more that I would wear, but I genuinely enjoy looking at them because they're creative and it's just fun to look at."

Women also cited Pinterest as a creative fashion outlet that they love to use. One participant expressed:

"I like Pinterest because you can find people and fashion companies or designers that curate collections of various pieces or outfits and from there I can create my own collection of boards, so that's cool, so it's almost like Pinterest is like kind of creating your own little museum or gallery."

Another participant said:

"I like going on Instagram, and blogs, and Pinterest to find people's boards and I find that you find one person's [Pinterest] board and then find five other boards that are similar style, you can go through those and then you can pin them to your board so it's such a good way to actually save everything."

Fashion is creative, inspiring, and exciting. Women are realizing this now more than ever. They are looking to fashion media as a creative outlet when the other parts of their lives lack creativity. Further, even if their lives do not lack creativity, they still use fashion media as a daily creative outlet, either through fashion print magazines, fashion blogs, and/or social media fashion sites.

Signals of Disconnection

While women have noticed advanced diversity within fashion blogs as well as enhanced creativity and visual stimulation, there are still some issues of disconnection that surfaced when women analyzed and talked about their experiences with fashion blogs. Women recognize when bloggers are not being authentic, they still notice a lack of body and

racial diversity among fashion bloggers, and issues of jealousy and unattainability were also noted.

Lack of authenticity

Women notice the promotion and commercialization that occurs in popular fashion blogs and this may cause them to disengage with the material. Specifically, if the promotion is something that does not fit the blogger's personal style or contradicts what the blogger has previously displayed in their looks, readers notice and distrust this. One participant said:

“I started to learn a bit about fashion and beauty bloggers, like their personal brand is sort of compromised by the marketing that has been incorporated into it, so now that I'm more aware of that I've become a little more weary of certain fashion blogs, I'm like, oh is this person just promoting all this stuff or is it what they see to be fashionable? I don't know, it's hard to say.”

When fashion blogs become too commercialized, some readers become disengaged. The commercialization of blogs makes women question the authority and style expertise of the blogger. An instance of this was exemplified when one participant remarked:

“With Blonde Salad [popular blogger], I really, really liked her when she first started out, I liked her looks, I liked the colours, I like how she just played with it, I liked her style like mix and match...and I could relate to this also and get inspired...And then she was doing too many commercial projects and then I just didn't enjoy it anymore...Fashion models, there's still something more interesting about them than her, because it just became too, you can just see that they pay her to make it, and that's it, and this is the end of the story.”

This is difficult, because promotion and commercialization is how fashion bloggers make

a living. They need to promote products and brands, but bloggers should make sure to be authentic in what they are marketing so as to not turn readers away.

The “fashionable” ideal

Although there has been progress in terms of diversity, and women do notice a greater representation of women and styles in fashion blogs, some of them still recognized that a lot of popular fashion bloggers they enjoy fit the white, thin, “fashionable” ideal. When analyzing the plus-size blogger, one woman said: “to be perfectly honest with you I would say she’s not the typical size of a blogger, so I would notice that probably right off the bat, it’s not a bad thing to me at all, it’s just that most bloggers tend to be really thin.” When talking at the end of the interview about the bloggers used as stimuli, one participant remarked:

“I didn’t even think about the fact that you would put in, or you would show me images of different ethnicities of bloggers, different sizes of bloggers, but yeah I guess that is an issue that I never really think about, except for the plus size blogging, is the ethnicities of the bloggers that I look at, most of them are white women, um, the vast majority of them are, Rumi [Neely] is one that isn’t white, so she’s like half Asian, something like that, but she’s one of the only examples I can think of that isn’t a white woman.”

The findings from the content analysis revealed that over half of the most popular North American fashion bloggers in this study did not fit the traditional North American beauty ideal, however some of the participants did not find this in their everyday blog consumption experience. One woman claimed: “[the majority of bloggers] are white and mostly a certain size and all the girls you showed, even more so than the one girl who’s

clearly a plus size girl, were very normal looking girls which I love in blogging but I don't see very often." Another woman said:

"Actually I feel like no matter the barriers that are being broken down in the fashion world, um, like stumbling upon alternative style and tom boy style, it's still way more rare to see plus size fashion and models on the internet, the things you click on are super like, um, international and inter-racial but I don't think I've ever stumbled upon a plus size blog, which is interesting."

Jealousy factor

Interestingly, some women find that fashion blogs bring out jealousy by presenting an image that they feel would be unattainable at this point in their lives. One woman explained:

"It's a bit frustrating because yes, they're people just like me but at the same time, they have so many, a lot of them, once they're successful, have so many pieces that I couldn't afford and it's not all bad, because I like seeing their beautiful accessories and they do try to do cheaper options, which is great but they never look as good and they don't usually picture themselves with the cheaper option, they just link it below so it's kind of reinforcing what something like Vogue would enforce, like wanting those higher end items."

One of the participants made an interesting comparison between fashion blogs and print magazines, commenting on her feelings about the images in each source. She remarked: "See, that's the thing, I feel like when I look through print magazines they make me feel happy whereas looking at a blogger I feel jealous...like I wanna wear her clothes, whereas print magazines are more to the point and less competitive." Women are able to relate to bloggers because they feel that they are more like them, but at the same time this

closeness can also create envy. If a woman sees a fashion blogger who is her age and has many amazing clothes and accessories, jealousy may very well surface. When viewing the first blogger (Atlantic Pacific) used in the analysis, one participant said: “I feel a little bit jealous because I don’t have everything in this wardrobe, um, so there’s a lot of want that goes into what I’m looking at.” Another woman claimed:

“Final point is, that knowledge of all these potential fashion ideas, potential travel spaces, with Cupcakes and Cashmere [popular fashion blogger], design inspiration and cooking, it’s kind of stressful like now that I’m working, thinking about things I want to buy, and I can’t, my life isn’t fashion blogging, I’m not a fashion blogger.”

Women do realize that popular bloggers are sent free items to promote and market; yet they still feel jealous and feel the desire to emulate how their favourite bloggers dress. After discussing the fact that a lot of bloggers are sent items to promote on their blog, one participant said:

“I wonder that a lot with my favourite blog, it’s called With Love from Kat, and she has the Stuart Weitzman knee high boots, she has like three pairs of them, she mentions where her favourite places to shop are, which is clearly who sponsors her, it’s not like its hidden but it’s hard to not want to emulate that, but at the same time it’s never possible because I work in health care.”

Along similar lines, another participant remarked:

“They’re [blogs] really nice to look at but you can’t get too wrapped up in them because a lot of the times you know fashion blogging is what they do for a living. They get sent these free clothes and it’s easy to get wrapped up in the fact that maybe they’re spending their life savings on these clothes and it’s not that

relatable to you because you're an everyday person who works 9 to 5 and enjoys dressing up you know, but doesn't have the same resources that these girls do and it's easy to get caught up in."

All of the participants in this study were between the ages of 21 and 25 years old, either finishing school or just starting to work full-time. At this point in their lives, they do not have a disposable income that would allow them to spend copious amounts of money on clothing. Seeing bloggers that wear new things everyday can amplify their feelings of want and desire, fostering it into jealousy. This holds true, even when the women realize that bloggers do get a lot of the items that they wear for free.

7. Discussion

7.1 Theoretical Contribution

My study found that women's experience with fashion has changed in the digital age, as women are finding new ways to consume and engage with fashion imagery. With the introduction of the Internet came a plethora of fashion blog websites, which have altered the landscape of fashion (Rocamora, 2012). Women in my study find fashion to be much more accessible and interactive than it has ever been. They increasingly see themselves and their style represented in fashion blog imagery (Karaminas, 2012). My participants noted the ease of reading fashion blogs online and on their phones, giving them almost unrestricted access to the fashion system (Karaminas, 2012). This access has allowed them to become more engaged and thus, more creative when it comes to fashion and style.

My study suggests that women are consuming fashion blogs as sources of diverse inspiration, sources that are filling the gaps in traditional fashion media. Supporting theoretical research by Pham (2011) and Gurrieri and Cherrier (2013), my study provides empirical evidence suggesting that fashion bloggers are challenging what people see as fashionable, opening up spaces for women, races, sizes, and styles that were previously left out of the fashion scape. Women are seeking a wider scope of diversity when it comes to fashion influence, and my study found that women desire to see themselves (their ethnicity, body size, style) represented in fashion imagery in order to relate and positively respond to the images they consume.

My study indicates that women are attracted to fashion blogs for a number of reasons including their diversity, their styling inspiration, and the compilation of visual images found on blogs; but, they are also wary of bloggers' promotion and marketing of

brands. My research suggests that readers get turned off when a blog becomes too commoditized and when they see a blogger promoting an abundance of products. Supporting research completed by Kumala et. al (2013), my study found that, in order for bloggers to be successful and trustworthy in the eyes of their readers, they must promote brands and that are in tune with their personal style.

When bloggers genuinely follow brands, their readers become loyal to the brands as well, seeing bloggers as a knowledgeable and unbiased source of information (Colliander and Dalhen, 2011). In fact, many participants admitted to imitating and replicating bloggers' outfits, thereby supporting the findings from Colliander and Dalhen (2011) that suggested fashion bloggers to be a type of online idol. Many participants in my study noted that there were a few bloggers that they follow religiously, gaining repeated exposure to them and forming relationships with them (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011). The repeated exposure tended to result in style inspiration and replication for the women's own outfits.

On the topic of fashion print magazines, when asked how they feel when looking through the images therein, none of the participants said that it made them feel bad about their bodies, challenging previous research conducted by Martin and Gentry (1997) and Turner and Hamilton (1997). This suggests that these previous findings may be out of date, and further research should be compiled. However, some participants did feel annoyed with the lack of diversity and the narrow beauty ideal that is promoted in mainstream fashion print magazines. Some participants also disclosed that they were jealous of the women displayed in images within fashion print magazines, but it was always related to clothing rather than body size.

Further, although some participants pointed out the negatives of fashion print magazines (expensive, lack of body diversity, high brow/expensive style) it is important to divulge that when women related fashion blogs to fashion print magazines, it was not always in a negative way. Supporting Phillips and McQuarrie's (2011) research, my study found that women use print magazines as sources of inspiration, creative outlets, and visual stimulation. The women in my study who preferred print magazines to other types of fashion media (7 out of 12) claimed that they found them inspiring, on trend, and made them feel happy and excited (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2011), challenging previous studies that found print magazines to result in negative emotions (Martin and Gentry, 1997; Turner and Hamilton, 1997).

7.2 Research Opportunities

Since this study focused on a young, Western demographic, future studies should expand the sample and scope of my research to further understand blog consumption practices of females. Scholars would benefit from exploring how female consumers in a non-Western environment engage with fashion blog images. It would be interesting to explore the consumption practices of a culture that does not hold the prominent beauty standard, to see if blogs have urged consumers to be more creative and confident with their style choices.

Many of the participants talked a lot about their engagement with fashion on social media. With sites such as Pinterest and Instagram being so popular, researchers could study how females are engaging with fashion on social media sites. This research could extend Karaminas' (2012) assertion that consumers are at the forefront of fashion media in the digital age, being able to access, participate in and create fashion media themselves (p. 181). My study revealed that social media sites are undoubtedly

influencing the fashion world and future research on consumer's engagement with them will offer valuable insight to females' fashion consumption.

Further, my study provides new insights to women's engagement with fashion print magazine images. Challenging previous studies that found the images to evoke negative emotions, a number of participants in my study found print images to be inspiring, fun and exciting, with over half of them claiming that print magazines are their favourite type of fashion media. This suggests that the previous research done by Martin and Gentry (1997) and Turner and Hamilton (1997) may be outdated and new research should be conducted.

7.3 Industry Implications

Women are looking to fashion blogs for varying types of inspiration. They have taken note of the diversity of styles and women accessible through fashion blogs and are excited about the progress being made in terms of the increased representation available through this type of fashion media. The findings developed in this study stand to influence and inform bloggers and magazine producers of what readers are looking for when they engage with fashion media. For industry to establish the most effective way to present fashion to consumers, it is essential to understand how consumers are reading fashion images and how they feel about the images they see.

To reach and positively influence female fashion consumers, fashion print magazines and other types of fashion media should use a greater diversity of images in terms of the women and styles they market. Expanding diversity expands the scope of women the industry can reach, and expanding the beauty ideal will undoubtedly affect more women. Online fashion publications should also keep in mind the fact that women are mostly looking for visual stimulation and close-up, detailed images when it comes to

engaging with fashion online. They are really seeking new ways to accessorize and style their outfits. Fashion image producers have an exciting opportunity to expand their readership and generate images and visuals that positively affect a wide variety of women.

Conclusion

The diversification of women's fashion has been expedited by personal fashion bloggers. These blogs and their images are opening spaces for women who are not traditionally represented in fashion media and female consumers are responding positively to this. They are seeing themselves and their styles represented more within fashion media, which is leading to increased inspiration and boldness in dressing themselves on a daily basis. Although women revealed some negative issues they find within fashion blogs, for the most part women are happy and encouraged by what they see in the current fashion blogosphere. Young women's fashion consumption of blog images therefore stands to expand the boundary of traditional fashion media, and may lead to more inclusive understandings of women and fashion engagement.

Appendix 1 (Blogger: Atlantic Pacific)



Atlantic Pacific	Post 1 Sept 29	Post 2 Sept 27	Post 3 Sept 24	Post 4 Sept 23	Post 5 Sept 21	Post 6 Sept 19	Post 7 Sept 17	Post 8 Sept 15	Post 9 Sept 13	Post 10 Sept 11
Appearance	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Behaviour	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Setting	C	D	D	D	D	D	C	D	D	D
Image Quality	C	C	C	D	C	D	C	C	C	D

Overall: 39/50

Comments: Blogger’s appearance more so conforms to cultural beauty ideals, however she is not exceptionally tall. The settings of her photos aren’t very luxurious but she does show off luxurious goods such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton bags, which are highly idealized. Most images were very high quality, clear and sharp.

Appendix 2 (Blogger: Camila Coelho/Super Vaidosa)



Camila Coelho	Post 1 Sept 29	Post 2 Sept 25	Post 3 Sept 25	Post 4 Sept 25	Post 5 Sept 23	Post 6 Sept 22	Post 7 Sept 17	Post 8 Sept 14	Post 9 Sept 11	Post 10 Sept 10
Appearance	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Behaviour	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Setting	D	D	D	D	C	D	D	D	C	C
Image Quality	C	C	D	C	C	D	C	C	C	C

Overall: 41/50

Comments: The blogger is average height and thin with muscular legs, very attractive and settings do not wash the photos out. The images look almost like they could be editorial fashion ad images, but the settings aren't very idealized. Some luxury goods are apparent in the photos but not in all of them. Most pictures are bright, intriguing and more idealized than discrepant.

Appendix 3 (Blogger: Fashion Toast)



Fashion Toast	Post 1 Sept 20	Post 2 Sept 18	Post 3 Sept 1	Post 4 Aug 31	Post 5 Aug 25	Post 6 Aug 15	Post 7 Jul 24	Post 8 Jul 18	Post 9 Jul 10	Post 10 Jul 8
Appearance	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Behaviour	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Setting	D	C	C	C	C	D	C	C	C	C
Image Quality	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C

Overall: 48/50

Comments: She is a very attractive, thin blogger, average height, with very high quality images. Many images look like editorial shots, and as if she has collaborated with magazines and designers on her shoots (for some it was noted that she had). The settings are usually idealized, and she has a unique and exotic look.

Appendix 4 (Blogger: Gabi Fresh)



Gabi Fresh	Post 1 Sept 29	Post 2 Sept 11	Post 3 Sept 8	Post 4 Sept 2	Post 5 Aug 27	Post 6 Aug 20	Post 7 Aug 18	Post 8 Aug 13	Post 9 Aug 4	Post 10 Jul 28
Appearance	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Behaviour	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Setting	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Image Quality	C	C	C	C	C	D	C	C	C	C

Overall: 29/50

Comments: She is an attractive, plus size, Asian blogger. She has very nice high quality photos, however settings weren't very luxurious or upscale for the most part. Some images looked washed out.

Appendix 5 (Blogger: ...love Maegan)



...love Meagan	Post 1 Sept 29	Post 2 Sept 25	Post 3 Sept 22	Post 4 Sept 18	Post 5 Sept 12	Post 6 Sept 9	Post 7 Sept 3	Post 8 Aug 29	Post 9 Aug 27	Post 10 Aug 21
Appearance	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Behaviour	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
Setting	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Image Quality	C	C	C	D	D	C	C	C	C	D

Overall: 27/50

Comments: She is attractive but you can tell that she is older, which doesn't conform to the prominent North American beauty ideal. The settings in her photos are not luxurious or upscale. Most of image quality is high, but some images look washed out.

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