

The Influence of Fashion Blogs on Consumers

Abstract

Fashion bloggers are fast becoming an influential force within the fashion industry, which has been facilitated by the growth of new media. However, very little research has looked at the influence of fashion bloggers on consumers, and their adoption of fashion trends. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand how fashion bloggers influence the attitudes and opinions of their readers. Six interviews with 18-24 year old females were conducted, and thematic analysis was used to identify several themes. The findings revealed some blogs can be viewed as “hubs” which operate within the fashion blog network. Within this network, the diffusion of information and ideas, similar to the diffusion of a product within the marketplace, takes place. Secondly, fashion blogs are more likely to be influential at the collective level rather than at the individual level as purchase behaviour and trend adoption was not the result of reading one blog but several blogs. Lastly, fashion blogs were often used for social comparison purposes when managing one’s self-concept. By reading a variety of blogs, the blog reader can avoid adopting a trend that may be associated with an undesirable group.

Introduction

Fashion bloggers are fast becoming regulars in the front row of fashion shows; a sign that fashion designers are beginning to acknowledge the power that these bloggers wield (Schaer, 2011). Likewise, companies have also been quick to offer free products to bloggers in the hope that they will share their brand experiences with their readers (Dunlop, 2010). However, very little research has looked at the impact that personal fashion bloggers have on their readers. The purpose of this exploratory study is to gain a greater understanding of how fashion bloggers influence the attitudes and behaviours of their readers, which in turn may lead to the adoption of fashion trends.

Background

The rise of digital technologies has enabled consumers to connect and interact with one another via the Internet, but it has also encouraged consumers to share their feelings and opinions on products and organisations (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). The sharing of consumer opinions online is called electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and can be defined as: *“Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”* (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39). Instead of reaching a small group of people, as with traditional WOM, consumers can now connect with thousands of individuals (Owen & Humphery, 2009) via online discussion boards, social networking websites, online communities, review websites and blogs (Cheung et al., 2008). This paper focuses on fashion blogs. Blogs or weblogs are “web-pages with frequently updated posts that are arranged so the newest material is at the top of the page...they provide a mechanism for personal publishing, encouraging the expression of thoughts, feelings, and commentary” (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005, p.970). Hence, blogs are a form of user generated content because they are comprised of content that has been prepared by an individual as opposed to an organisation (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

Literature on news blogs (McIntosh, 2005; Banning & Sweetser, 2007) and blogs in general exists (Kent, 2008; Haung, Chou & Lin, 2008), but gaps in our knowledge still remain with regards to fashion blogs. And yet, fashion blogs are becoming an important communication tool in the fashion industry (Dunlop, 2011; Schaer, 2011) because fashion bloggers are using

the power of eWOM to spread their opinions on brands and companies to their readers, which can be in the tens of thousands. This new found power gives consumers the ability to “build or break” a brand (Owen & Humphery, 2009) because eWOM, unlike marketer communications, is perceived to have little bias (Gruen et al., 2006). Kent (2008) identifies three strengths of blogs. The first describes their ability to connect people with similar interests over the Internet. These groups can also access information that was once only harboured by experts (Kent, 2008). Secondly, blog readers can communicate with the blogger and other blog readers, thus demonstrating the interactive element of blogs and their potential as eWOM (Kent, 2008). Finally, blogs have the power to “reach the choir”. Since people have to search for blogs it is probable that these people are like-minded individuals who have similar interests or worldviews (Kent, 2008). This final element illustrates why organisations should pay closer attention to blogs if they want to influence opinion leaders (Kent, 2008). As previous studies have found, readers of user-generated blogs tend to view these sources as credible (Johnson and Kaye 1998 as cited in Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Huang, et. al., 2008), and trustworthy, more so than producer generated content (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Moreover, as Cheong & Morrison’s (2008) study revealed, individuals who generated blog content were perceived as opinion leaders, and accordingly the information they posted was often considered during the decision making process.

Bloggers as Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders represent a powerful group in the marketplace because they are able to influence consumers via word of mouth (Stokberger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2009). This influence is considered a key component of opinion leadership because an opinion leader can influence future purchase decisions and attitude formation (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Goldsmith & Clark, 2008). It should be noted that opinion leaders tend to be knowledgeable about a product category, such as clothing, rather than one specific product (Shoham & Ruvio, 2008). They also tend to be more explorative and innovative with their product category, and have a high and enduring level of involvement and interest with the product category (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Past literature has focussed on opinion leaders in online communities and discussion boards (e.g. de Valck et al., 2009; Dwyer, 2007), but opinion leaders within the blogging arena has largely been overlooked. Similarly, even though the role of the opinion leader in the diffusion of a product or trend has been studied (van Eck et al., 2004; Lyons & Henderson, 2005), there has been limited research on the role of the blogger in the product adoption process. Since fashion bloggers are becoming increasingly influential in the fashion industry, it is necessary to understand how they influence their followers. As Fournier & Lee (2009, p.109) state, opinion leaders have an important role in social networks because they “spread information, influence decisions and help new ideas gain traction”. Furthermore, when opinion leaders operate in social networks, the product is diffused through the marketplace much faster because the spread of information is quick (van Eck, et al., 2004). We maintain that fashion bloggers are important opinion leaders because they present ideas to a social network of blog followers, and can influence the diffusion of new ideas or fashion trends. As Vilpponen et al.’s (2006) study revealed, online news sites, and consumer blogs influenced “early adopters” because they were more likely to turn to external sources of information like the Internet rather than internal sources like friends and family. At the same time, Phau and Lo (2004) suggest that fashion innovators are more likely to try new fashions first before facilitating the spread of the trend to later buyers. They further stipulate that fashion innovators are likely to participate in WOM and further promote new fashions to non-innovators (Phau & Lo, 2004). Some researchers suggest that fashion innovators are influential in the diffusion process because they are seen as role models for later consumers (Beaudoin et al., 2003; Rickman and Cosenza, 2007).

Method

The primary objective of this study was to elicit a greater understanding of how fashion bloggers influence their readers. Our exploratory study employed an interpretivist approach because we were interested in exploring our participants' lived experiences (Crotty 1998). Six semi-structured depth interviews were conducted with 18-24 year old fashion-conscious females, and were audio-recorded. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. Members of Generation Y were appropriate for this study because they are more likely to use the Internet for entertainment purposes as well as communication (Jones & Fox, 2009), they are more likely to read blogs and write their own blogs (Jones & Fox, 2009), and they tend to be highly aware of fashion trends and brands (Noble, Haytko and Phillips, 2009). As this study was exploratory in nature, six participants were considered an acceptable sample size for this type of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and an iterative process of coding, categorising and abstracting of the data took place (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Spiggle, 1994). While the purpose of qualitative research is not to produce generalisable results, research trustworthiness must be maintained (Hirschman, 1986; Maxwell, 1992). Hence, a variety of techniques and checks were used: descriptive validity (Wolcott 1990), interpretative validity (Maxwell 1992), and credibility (Patton 2002).

Findings & Discussion

Several themes emerged from the study but for the purpose of this paper we will only focus on three themes. The terms "blog followers" and "blog readers" will be used interchangeably.

Fashion Blogs as Social Hubs

Social media allows consumers to not only search for opinions on products during the pre-purchase information search phase but also to share post-purchase experiences and attitudes (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). One could therefore view these groups as "virtual communities of consumption", which Kozinets (1999) defines as "affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities" (p.254). Virtual communities are considered more influential than traditional reference groups because consumers join these groups due to their common interests (de Valck et al., 2009). However, even though our participants described fashion blogs as a community, they did not necessarily actively participate in the discussion. Hence, Kozinets (1999) might have defined our participants as *devotees* because their consumption activity was high but their ties to the community were weak. However, there is evidence to suggest that they still felt connected to this community. As Katie (22yrs) explains: "*I think in terms of that I quite like blogs because it makes you feel like maybe you're part of something or it connects you to what's happening somehow.*" Instead of categorising blogs as a virtual community of consumption, a term coined by Kozinets (1999), it may be more appropriate to consider them as hubs which operate within a social network. A hub is a person (or node within a network) that disseminates information which is then diffused to other nodes within the network (Goldenberg et al., 2009). The nodes in this case are the fashion bloggers and anyone who comes into contact with their communications. Fashion bloggers act as a node passing information that they have acquired from other bloggers on to their readers and additional nodes. The vast and complex network was mentioned by many of the participants when they discussed how they discovered their blogs. Carrie (24yrs) states: "*I found 'Katherine is Awesome' through 'Isaac Likes' and I think I found 'Isaac Likes'...I have no idea. I think I think most of the time finding new blogs is when blogs are suggested by other blogs*". Other participants stated that they frequently clicked on links within the blogs which would lead them to a variety of different yet related fashion blogs. This is facilitated by the website as bloggers often include hyperlinks to other fashion blogs (to credit them as the

source of information) or to simply inform readers of similar or complementary content. We suggest that within this network of blogs, the diffusion of information and ideas, similar to the diffusion of a product within the marketplace, takes place. Within this social network, a hierarchy of blogs appears to exist. The most popular blog sites (which tend to have a high number of social ties, and reflect a high level of fashion expertise) can be viewed as hubs because they are the first to diffuse fashion trends throughout the blogosphere.

Fashion Blogs: The Importance of Social Comparison

Our participants not only read blogs to find out what other people were wearing, they also reviewed multiple blog sites in order to maintain their social identity, that is, they wanted to make sure they made the right fashion choices. *“Yeah I just like to see trends, the way that they dress. Coz I just find it so hard to dress every day, it’s not hard, but I like to know what looks alright. But by seeing the way they change it helps me to be able to change...I feel like I’m so bad at dressing myself so if I kind of copy someone else, but not copy them – do you know what I mean?”* – Anna (21yrs). Some of the participants also felt confident to purchase certain items once they saw others wearing it, hence highlighting how the product diffusion process begins. For example: *“Umm it depends on how much I like the item at first sight, and then if other people are wanting it, it’s like a synergy effect it makes me want it that so much more. I have to get that!”* – Jackie (19yrs)

These findings suggest that fashion blogs are not only used as an information source, but may also be used to measure personal social acceptance. This relates to social comparison theory which was first conceived by Festinger (1954). Social comparison posits that when there is uncertainty about an issue, in this case product choices, people will compare themselves with others who they perceive to be similar to them in order to increase the stability of one’s self-evaluation (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2011). Social comparison is prominent with clothing choices because fashion changes regularly thus increasing the risk of social failure. Since fashion is intrinsically visual, which makes it easy for one to compare oneself with others (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2011), fashion blog followers may read blogs to determine which trends or styles they want to avoid in order to protect their self concept. By reading a variety of blogs, the blog follower can identify which groups and trends they do not want to be associated with. Hence, they can avoid a negative self-concept in some situations, or in other situations approach a positive self-concept (Banister & Hogg, 2003). Thus, the adoption and avoidance of certain trends may be an attempt to enhance or protect the individual’s self-esteem (Banister & Hogg, 2003).

Fashions Blogs as a Collective Force

Interestingly, it would appear that blogs are more influential at the collective level, e.g., many bloggers, rather than at an individual-specific level, e.g., one blogger. As Carrie states: *“Yeah definitely, it’s just kind of like collective. So it’s like all of the things in my day that I see, they go inside my head somehow and then produce something which is me. I think it definitely affects me but I don’t think its super tangible, like I would never - like I’m not the sort of person who would see someone I like and then copy them.”* Purchase behaviour and trend adoption was not the result of reading one blog but several blogs – “a collective group of blogs”. More specifically, a trend needed to appear on multiple blogs before the participants would consider the trend for themselves. As Jackie states: *“...I was never into the colour turquoise until I saw people wearing them on every single blog I followed yeah so it’s that kind of thing, I was never into turquoise until I figured out “oh everyone’s wearing it.”* So even though a blogger’s opinion might appeal to a reader, she may wait until the same trend appears elsewhere on the blogosphere in order to minimise the risk of adopting an

inappropriate fashion trend. Since fashion trends are fast moving there is often a degree of uncertainty about current styles, which causes some consumers to be concerned about the appropriateness of their choices (Kang & Park-Poaps, 2011). Furthermore, the ability of consumers to process the credibility of word of mouth messages is also limited due to this uncertainty. Hence, this explains why some participants prefer to gather information from several blog sources before adopting a trend. The elaboration likelihood model suggests that those with the ability and motivation to process a message will base their attitudes on the quality of the argument whereas those without the ability or the motivation will form their attitudes on peripheral cues (Petty et al., 1991), such as the credibility of the communicator or consumer group consensus (Kumkale et al., 2010).

The findings from this study also revealed that there were four core characteristics of a “good blogger”, which included trustworthiness (the perception that bloggers were not being influenced by outside sources, such as companies), expertise (the perception that certain fashion bloggers were experts on fashion, choosing only the best pieces of information to share with their readers), authenticity (the perception that the blogger’s persona was similar in both the online and offline environment), and personal relevance to the readers (the participants all responded positively to blogs that they could personally relate to. For example, many of the participants preferred bloggers who wore clothes that were in their price range, that had accessible personalities, and in one case, when bloggers had a more “normal” body shape as opposed to a model figure). Thus, the similarity between blogger and reader also has an impact on attitude formation and the decision making process. Interestingly, even though some of the bloggers used product placement and accepted free products from companies, the participants did not regard them as biased because they believed the bloggers would only blog about products which they believed were good.

Conclusions & Implications

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to existing literature by highlighting the powerful role that fashion bloggers can play in today’s marketplace; as opinion leaders they can be very influential during the product diffusion process. Our study revealed that there appears to be a blog hierarchy within the fashion blogosphere, and within this network of blogs, the diffusion of information and ideas, similar to the diffusion of a product within the marketplace, takes place. The blogs at the top of the ‘blog hierarchy’ are more likely to be influential due to their popularity and appeal to innovators and early adopters, hence we would argue that brand managers should target those who are at the top of the blog hierarchy first. Brand managers should also target multiple blogs within the network because our findings suggest that fashion blogs exert more influence at the collective level rather than at the individual level. As highlighted by some of our participants, they would not adopt a new trend until they saw it on multiple blog sites. This is something that has not been considered before. Lastly, this study highlighted how consumers can avoid a negative self-concept via the consumption of fashion blogs. Fashion blogs are not only a source for information; they also provide scope for social comparison and image management. To conclude, this study has provided greater insights into how fashion blogs influence consumers. However, there are several issues that need to be borne in mind when reading the results of this study. Firstly, as this was an exploratory study, further research, such as a quantitative study, is needed to test whether these findings can be generalised to a larger population. Secondly, the study focused on fashion blogs, hence other product categories need to be explored to see if our findings are transferable in a different context. Lastly, the level of influence fashion bloggers wield over their followers may depend on the age of the blog reader and the level of knowledge that the reader possess, hence further research is required to compare different groups of consumers.

References

- Banister, E. H. & Hogg, M. K. (2004). Negative symbolic consumption and consumers' drive for self-esteem: The case of the fashion industry. *European Journal of Marketing*, 38(7), 850-868.
- Banning, S. A. & Sweetser, K. D. (2007). How much do they think it affects them and whom do they believe?: Comparing the third-person effect and credibility of blogs and traditional media. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(4), 451-466.
- Beaudoin, P., Lachance, M. J. & Robitaille, J. (2003). Fashion innovativeness, fashion diffusion and brand sensitivity among adolescents. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 7(1), 23-30.
- Bertrandias, L. & Goldsmith, R. E. (2006). Some psychological motivations for fashion opinion leadership and fashion opinion seeking. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 10(1), 25-40.
- Cheong, H. J. & Morrison, M. A. (2008). Consumers' reliance on product information and recommendations found in UGC. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 8(2), 38-49.
- Cheung, C., Lee, M. & Rabjohn, N. (2008). The impact of electronic word of mouth the adoption of online opinions in online customer communities. *Internet Research*, 18(3), 229-247.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, Allen & Unwin.
- de Valck, K., van Bruggen, G. H. & Wierenga, B. (2009). Virtual communities: A marketing perspective. *Decision Support Systems*, 47(3), 185-203.
- Dunlop, E. (2010). *All keyed up about fashion*. Retrieved from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=10674866
- Dwyer, P. (2007). Measuring the value of electronic word of mouth and its impact in consumer communities. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 21(2), 63-79.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117-140.
- Fournier, S. & Lee, L. (2009). Getting brand communities right. *Harvard Business Review*, 87(4), 105-111.
- Goldenberg, J., Han, S., Lehman, D. R. & Hong, J. W. (2009). The role of hubs in the adoption process. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(2), 1-13.
- Goldsmith, R. E. & Clark, R. A. (2008). An analysis of factors affecting fashion opinion leadership and fashion opinion seeking. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 12(3), 308-322.
- Gruen, T. W., Osmonbekov, T. & Czaplewski, A. J. (2006). eWOM: The impact of customer-to-customer online know-how exchange on customer value and loyalty. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(4), 449-456.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G. & Gremmler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet? *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 18(1), 38-52.
- Hirschman, E. C. (1986), Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (3), 237-249.
- Huang, L., Chou, Y. & Lin, C. (2008). The influence of reading motives on the responses after reading blogs. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour*, 11(3), 351-355.
- Jones, S. & Fox, S. (2009). *Generational differences in online activities*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Generations-Online-in-2009/Generational-Differences-in-Online-Activities/3-Teens-and-Generation-Y-find-entertainment-and-social-networks-online.aspx>

- Kang, J. & Park-Poaps, H. (2011). Motivational antecedents of social shopping for fashion and its contribution to shopping satisfaction. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. Retrieved from <http://ctr.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/10/04/0887302X11422443.abstract>
- Kent, M. L. (2008). Critical analysis of blogging in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 34(?), 32-40.
- Kozinets, R. V. (1999). E-tribalized marketing? The strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal*, 17(3), 252-264.
- Kumkale, G. T., Seignourel, P. J. & Albarracin, D. (2010). The effects of source credibility in the presence or absence of prior attitudes: Implications for the design of persuasive communication campaigns. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 40(6), 1325-1356.
- Lyons, B. & Henderson, K. (2005). Opinion leadership in a computer-mediated environment. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 4(5), 319-329.
- Mangold, W. G. & Faulds, D. J. (2009). Social media: The new hybrid element of the promotion mix. *Business Horizons*, 52(4), 357-365.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1992), Understanding and Validity in Qualitative Research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62 (3), 279.
- McIntosh, S. (2005). Web review: Blogs: Has their time finally come – or gone? *Global Media and Communication*, 1(3), 385-388.
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications.
- Noble, S. M., Haytko, D. L. & Phillips, J. (2009). What drives college-age generation y consumers? *Journal of Business Research*, 62(6), 617-628.
- Owen, R. & Humphery, P. (2009). The structure of online marketing communication channels. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research*, 3, 54-62.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Thousand Oaks: California, Sage Publications.
- Petty, R. E, Unnava, R. H & Strathman A. J. (1991), "Theories of Attitude Change", in T. S. Roberston and H. H. Kassarian's (eds.) *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 241-280.
- Phau, I. & Lo, C. (2004). Profiling fashion innovators a study of self concept, impulse buying and internet purchase intent. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 8(4), 399-411.
- Rickman, T. A. & Cosenza, R. M. (2007). The changing digital dynamics of multichannel marketing the feasibility of the weblog: text mining approach for fast fashion trending. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 11(4), 604-621.
- Schaer, C. (2011). *The write stuff*. Retrieved from: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=10714340
- Shoham, A. & Ruvio, A. (2008). Opinion leaders and followers: A replication and extension. *Psychology & Marketing*, 25(3), 280-297.
- Spiggle, S. (1994). "Analysis and Interpretation of Qualitative Data in Consumer Research." *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (December), 491-503.
- Stockburger-Sauer, N. E. & Hoyer, W. D. (2009). Consumer advisors revisited: What drives those with market mavenism and opinion leadership tendencies and why? *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 8(2-3), 100-115.
- Trammell, K. A. & Keshelashivili, A. (2005). Examining the new influencers: A self-presentation study of A-list blogs. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 968-982.

- Van Eck, P. S., Jager, W. & Leeflang, P. S. H. (2011). Opinion leaders' role in innovation diffusion: A stimulation study. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 28(2), 187-203.
- Vilopponen, A., Winter, S. & Sundqvist, S. (2006). Electronic word-of-mouth in online environments: Exploring referral network structure and adoption behaviour. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 6(2), 63-77.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1990), On Seeking - and Rejecting - Validity in Qualitative Research, in E. W. Eisner and A. Peshkin's (eds.), *Qualitative Inquiry in Education: The Continuing Debate*, New York, Teachers College Press, 121-152.