Credibility in the Blogosphere - Fashion Blogger Attitudes to Blog Marketing

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Abstrakt:

The emergence of social media has changed the ways in which marketing is performed, prompting businesses to embrace blogs as part of their marketing strategy. The fashion industry has been particularly quick in realizing the power of blogs, giving rise to fashion blogs that have begun to compete with traditional forms of media. Consequently, fashion blogs have come under fire from journalists that accuse bloggers of biased and overly commercialized reporting.

Businesses, magazine editors as well as research into blog marketing take for granted bloggers' willingness to participate in blog marketing, while little research has been done to support this presumption. This thesis explores blogger attitudes towards marketing on their personal blogs, focusing on English-language fashion bloggers. The aim of the thesis is to gain insight into fashion blogger awareness of blog marketing in relation to credibility and to assess blogger willingness to participate in said form of marketing.

Data for the thesis were collected in 2012 through an online questionnaire sent to bloggers in the English language fashion blogosphere, providing material for a qualitative, thematic analysis of respondents' thoughts.

The results show that fashion bloggers hold mostly positive views regarding blog marketing, but their opinions differ in the degree of willingness to engage in marketing practices. This willingness seems to correlate with the degree of blogger professionalization. Fashion bloggers who considered themselves professionals or aimed to become professional bloggers expressed an educated understanding of commercial practices and an awareness of the reasons why companies approach them. The data also revealed a genuine interest on the part of bloggers in fostering relationships with businesses. Fashion bloggers who viewed blogging as a hobby emphasized the personal aspect of blogging and viewed the practice as a creative outlet and a form of social interaction. These bloggers were more apprehensive regarding blog marketing, and emphasized the importance of attribution and personal taste above all else in regard to marketing.

The results of this study do not support the notion that bloggers are fortune seekers willing to agree to any form of blog marketing. Instead, the analysis suggests that bloggers actively reflect on the role of marketing in relation to credibility and will only take part in marketing practices that happen on their own terms.

Nyckelord:

Fashion blogs, blogging, social media, credibility, blog marketing, attitudes

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1   Introduction

Over the last ten years, social media has grown increasingly important for corporate communication, and companies have learned to embrace Facebook and blogs as part of their marketing strategy. At the same time, disdain for blogs has begun to increase, with traditional media questioning the legitimacy of blogs and the credibility of blog writers. Companies, magazine editors as well as research into blog marketing take for granted bloggers willingness to participate in blog marketing, while little research has been done to support this presumption. This thesis explores blogger attitudes towards marketing on their personal blogs, focusing on English-language fashion bloggers.

1.1   Background

Recently, marketers have experienced a considerable fragmentation of media and an excessive commercial clutter, both of which have resulted in customers growing increasingly resistant towards marketing messages (Singh et al. 2008: 281). Due to the emergence of social media and its subscription features, the audience that can be reached by a particular marketing message has also grown much smaller, changing the nature of marketing. While marketers used to be able to rely on mass media such as television to reach a global audience, today the audience has become in charge of what marketing messages reach us – and how. Marketers have been forced to move from global marketing to niche marketing, targeting specific audiences through specialized methods.

Furthermore, marketing is no longer just about marketing a product or a brand; it is about marketing a feeling, and having the customers experience the product or brand (Singh et al. 2008: 281). Marketing today revolves around making an emotional connection with the customer (Singh et al. 2008: 281), while the customer is becoming increasingly hard to reach. This has driven companies in search of more creative ways to reach customers, and many marketers have realized the potential of blogs when communicating with customers. Because blogs are at their most effective as word of mouth advertising, companies have entered into

collaborations with bloggers, allowing the bloggers to do the talking instead of the marketers (Spero et al. 2004: 152).

But as customers are becoming more tech-savvy, traditional tools such as TV, radio, print, and billboards have become less effective (Singh et al. 2008: 282-283). This means that marketers need a better strategy to reach these elusive customers. Marketers seem to have embraced the Internet, and more specifically social media such as blogs as a useful marketing vehicle (2008: 286).

There are various reasons why blogs are useful from a marketing viewpoint. Blogs allow for a customized way of communication that engages the customer, builds trust and loyalty and allows for community building among customers. As such, blogs are also a way for firms to stay relevant, and to personalize their interaction with the customers. According to Singh et al., this kind of personalization can become valuable in future marketing efforts, as it will open a continuing dialog with the customer. In short, firms can use blogs to gain marketing intelligence, or to provide an on-going dialog between the customer and the marketer. Many marketers already recognize blogs as a useful marketing vehicle. (2008: 285-286).

Of course, blog marketing is not entirely problem-free. Singh et al. explain that one of the main reasons firms are still afraid to use blogs in their marketing is the lack of control and boundaries. Companies cannot control what people will say about them in their blogs, and this may lead to negative publicity. Marketers have – as result – realized that the best way to target young customers through blogs is to work with them, and to allow them to do the talking instead of the marketers (Spero et al. 2004: 152).

Like a good viral marketing campaign, blogs should be fun and intriguing, and have to originate from a credible source in order to satisfy the customer (Singh et al. 2008: 283). Because young customers have become increasingly disillusioned with marketing ploys, they respond better to word of mouth advertising that comes from a source they trust: their peers. Blogs allow young adults to independently shape, modify and spread information. If they like a certain brand, they will most likely say so on their blog. Instead of trying to find out what values young customers

appreciate, companies are letting their products be marketed by customers who already represent these values.

In addition to building trust, allowing young consumers to handle marketing themselves also serves another purpose: peer pressure. According to Ian Spero and Merlin Stone, "teenagers are aspirational, but consumer spending is strongly influenced by peer group pressure and internally defined values" (2004: 153). While young consumers want to maintain an air of individuality and therefore seek more individualized marketing messages, they also feel a strong need to fit in with their peers, and shape their identity according to this need. If a product or a brand is present in a blog that is popular among peers, young consumers themselves are also likely to be influenced into liking the product.

1.2   Key concepts

Before delving deeper into the research, it is necessary to go through and clarify certain key concepts. While blogs can no longer be considered a new form of media, much of the terminology is still foreign to anyone not familiar with social media or the blogosphere. In this chapter, I have collected and explained the terms and concepts that are most salient to my research.

1.2.1   Blogs

The word *blog* is a shortened form of the original web log, a form of computer-mediated communication through text or image produced by blog writers, often referred to as bloggers (Crystal 2006: 15).

Singh et al. (2008: 284) define a blog as "a web site on which an individual or group of users produce an ongoing narrative". The narrative Singh et al. refer to consist of messages posted at intervals, which are more commonly known as blog posts. These posts are arranged according to their time stamps, so the latest post is usually located at the top of the page (Domingo and Heinonen 2008).

Blog posts are short and informal, and usually quite interpretative and subjective in style (Domingo and Heinonen 2008), and the written language is usually unmediated (Crystal 2006: 15). In other words, posts are published directly

by the author, without any intermediary control. Blogs are considered to be in competition with traditional media and journalism, as blog posts are produced through the familiar journalistic process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting and publishing information. In fact, blogs can be considered the one area in social media where social and traditional media overlap (Matikainen 2009: 13).

Blogs are similar to message boards in the sense that they allow for conversation through commenting (Singh 2008: 284). Comments allow for horizontal, two-way communication between the blogger and the blog readers, and a more personal connection to the blogger (Dahlén; Pham 2011: 4, Zhu & Tan 2007: 2). As a medium, blogs differ from traditional media in that they allow for deeper communication with a smaller target group (Dahlén). Blogs can be written by private persons or maintained by companies or institutions, and blogs can be either personal or used for commercial promotion and marketing. (Pham 2011: 4). Communication between bloggers also occurs, and as bloggers read each other, link, and comment, they not only express and shape opinions, but encourage conversation on a global scale (Baker and Green, 2008, Singh 2008: 284).

Blogs originally started as a way for technological companies to keep track of product development, but blogging soon became popular and attracted new users due to its ease. No technical background or knowledge of HTML was needed in order to blog, and bloggers did not even need to own a computer, as access to one was enough. In addition, users did not need to install anything, as most blogging tools were server-based (Singh et al. 2008: 284). Though blogging has evolved and some platforms have become more technically challenging, most of the ease of use that applied to blogging in its early beginnings still holds true even today.

1.2.2   Personal blogs

Personal blogs are blogs written by private persons, for their own sake (Ekman & Ronvall: 48). This means that a personal blog is independent, and the blogger is free to write whatever he/she wants (Borg, Branthammer & Olsson, 2007: 28). For most of these bloggers, the main reason for writing is to share personal opinions and experiences concerning a certain area of interest, normally pertaining to daily life (Dahlén; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright, 2004: 6; Zhu & Tan 2007: 2).

Personal blogs work as a type of self-representation of their authors, and provide considerable information regarding the blogger's opinions and values (Gilly and Schau 2003). The most common form of blog is the diary blog, which functions as a narrative of the blogger's daily life, but may also include "general musings and opinionated writing" (Crystal 2006: 242).

1.2.3   Fashion blogs

Blogs can deal with as many different topics as there are writers, but blogs do tend to settle on just one or two particular themes. Fashion and lifestyles are two of the most intensely covered themes in blogs, and fashion blogs have come to constitute a sizeable segment of the blogosphere (Laurell 2014, Mortara & Roberti 2017: 88).

Blogs that deal with fashion can be divided into roughly two categories: fashion blogs and style blogs. Fashion blogs tend to focus on the fashion industry, celebrities, collections and trends – as well as critiquing these. Fashion blogs "emphasize the aesthetic dimensions of fashion" and are often image-heavy (Pham, 2011: 10). In comparison, style blogs focus more on exploring and expressing individual style, through textual analysis and images of outfits or collages of coveted products. Instead of the fashion industry, *the mode* by which aesthetic, cultural and economic fashion forms are produced is celebrated and critiqued (Pham, 2011: 10, Borg, Branthammer & Olsson 2007: 29).

While the two aforementioned categories of blogs have distinct characteristics, they also tend to overlap, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. Both blog types tend to be personal, and are managed by fashion consumers rather than producers. Many fashion bloggers give equal amounts of space to discussing collections and presenting their personal style, and most style bloggers also do not write solely about style with complete disregard to fashion-related topics. So, while some bloggers and blog readers may feel a need to differentiate between style and fashion blogs, it makes more sense to consider style blogs a sub-category of fashion blogs, rather than a stand-alone category. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term 'fashion blog' to refer to both of the blog types mentioned.

1.2.4   Blogosphere

The totality of blog-sites on the Internet is called the blogosphere (Crystal 2006: 15). Giving a precise count of blogs on the Internet is difficult, as there is no standard definition of what a blog is and how it functions. While a precise count of blogs does not exist, we know the numbers are high: Nielsen and NM Incite's U.S. Digital Consumer Report tracked 181 million blogs around the world by the end of 2011. In 2018, the site *SoftwareFindr* estimated that the total number of blogs online was around 505 million blogs (2018). Most blogs are published from the United States and the majority of them are written in English. (Pham 2011: 4) A cursory look at the blogosphere might suggest it is dominated by men, and Technorati Media's "State of the Blogosphere 2011" report maintained that roughly three fifths of bloggers are male, and that the proportion holds true over all blogger types. While it is very likely that the most popular blogs (which are mainly political ones) are run by men, previous research shows slightly more blogs are created by girls and women than by boys and men (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright 2004; Lenhart & Fox 2006; Pham, Minh-Ha T. 2011: 6). Though exact information regarding the gender relations in the fashion blogosphere is scarce, the fact that most lists of the top 10-20 most influential fashion bloggers only include one male blogger could be interpreted as an indication of female domination.

The term *blogosphere* encompasses blogs, but also the communities of readers that form around blogs and engage in communication with bloggers and each other. In the case of the fashion blogosphere, readers can usually comment, e-mail and possibly even meet the bloggers they follow. As they become familiar with bloggers and the details of their lives, readers form bonds with the bloggers. In the words of Jessica Schroeder, writer of the blog 'What I Wore': "It's like a fashion club" (Corcoran, 2010).

1.2.5   Communal marketing and consumer-generated content

Consumer-generated content is content dealing with a product or a brand that is produced by the consumer. Over the past few years, brands have started to engage consumers in their marketing campaigns, using communal marketing practices that involve the public in the development of a campaign. Consumers might be invited

to share their ideas or to elaborate on what a particular brand or product means to them, and the result can involve a myriad of content type, including personal stories, photos, video or even audio. This produced content serves as advertisement in itself, but brands can also incorporate this content into their campaigns, creating the illusion of autonomous, interactive communication between consumers and brands (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould 2009).

1.2.6 Word of Mouth Marketing (WOMM)

The reason blogs are of interest to marketers is that bloggers engage in word of mouth (WOM). WOM is "all informal communications (sic) directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987). WOM involves individuals sharing information about their experiences with various products and services, and when this type on influencing is intentionally harnessed by professional marketers, it is referred to as word of mouth marketing (WOMM) (Steffes and Burgee 2008:43, Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner 2010: 71). According to Silverman (2001) the real power behind word of mouth lies in the producer of the message: because the person sending the message (and therefore, the message in itself) is not considered commercial, the content is considered more credible than traditional marketing. Furthermore, because the producer of the message is not a professional marketer, the form of the message is usually closer to informal communication, further increasing the credibility of the message. WOMM messages are usually able to transform "commercial information into cultural stories relevant to the members of particular communities" (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner 2010: 86).

1.2.7 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic word of mouth (or eWOM), stands for "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual of former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet" (Hennig, Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004: 38). In short, eWOM is electronically communicated word of mouth. What differentiates eWOM from

WOM is, however, not only the means of communication, but also the mode. The wide reach of the Internet makes it possible to share opinions and experiences to a virtually unlimited audience, rather than one-to-one (Dellarocas, 2003). Steffes and Burgee (2008: 43) maintain that unlike traditional WOM, eWOM is usually asynchronous by nature, meaning "the sender and receiver of information are separated by both space and time". They go on to state that due to its electronic nature, eWOM makes it difficult for the receiver to judge the credibility of the sender's message and the sender him/herself. When bloggers make product endorsements on their blogs, these serve as very powerful eWOM. As the most popular blogs can have hundreds of thousands of readers, the immediate reach of blogger endorsements far surpasses that of traditional WOMM.

1.2.8   Blog marketing

Blog marketing is any type of marketing effort made through the use of a blog. Blog marketing is a fairly wide concept, as there are several different ways a brand can be marketed through blogs, especially personal ones. Marketing can be overt, in the form of advertorial banners next to or in between blog posts. Advertorials, however, are not considered as effective as more covert forms of marketing, such as product placement and endorsements. In fact, the most common practice as of late has been to combine online display ads with more interactive elements of a marketing campaign: brands that ask bloggers to create custom content around their product tend to run banner ads on these blogs during the campaign.

Another, fairly overt type of blog marketing is that of contests or giveaways, in which bloggers encourage their readers to create content or comment in exchange for free products, which are handed out to participants based on a draw. These types of contests create engagement and can increase followers both for the blogger and for the brand sponsoring the contest (Corcoran, 2010).

Fashion blogs that cover the personal style of the writer often also engage in product placement, which is done through posting photos of outfits that feature sponsored products. It is not uncommon for bloggers to receive free product samples that they subsequently write about and recommend based on personal experience. The strength of blog marketing lies in these types of guerrilla marketing

tactics, which mask the marketing message as journal material. Because bloggers are able to share information in a friendly, engaging and informal environment, they can help brands create personalized forms of marketing that engage readers more successfully than overt, typical advertising. Zhu and Tan (2007: 2) confirm that blog readers are more likely to be persuaded by marketing disguised as WOM than by traditional advertising, and the ease and effectiveness of this type of marketing is very attractive to brands.

In an interview conducted by Michael Serazio, Ted Murphy founder and CEO of a buzz marketing firm that specializes in social media illuminates why brands have become so enamored with using bloggers as marketers:

> "If you give ten different bloggers a laptop and ask them to talk about it, each one of them is going to come up with their own slant… Different people are going to value different things about your product and by giving them the freedom to create the ad unit instead of saying, 'Here's what we think is important, so here's what we want you to say,' you have the ability to create hundreds or thousands of permutations of that ad message, each of those being relevant to the audience that's consuming the message."

(Michael Serazio, Doctoral Thesis. 2010)

The nature of blog marketing is difficult to define in a concise manner, as it is constantly changing. Companies such as Barneys New York, Gap and Coach are collaborating with fashion bloggers to create new forms of advertising, which include inviting bloggers to guest blog for a brand, creating or requesting videos of bloggers talking about or wearing a particular brand, or engaging the blogger in professional capacity. Brands have also employed bloggers as stylists (styling window displays or collections for the runway) and even as designers, allowing bloggers to design individual products or even entire collections (Corcoran, 2010).

1.2.9   Opinion leaders/Influencers

Bloggers are viewed as opinion leaders, meaning that they are leaders that influence the opinions of others. Opinion leaders usually have more motivation, self-confidence, knowledge and wider networks than others, and serve as innovators.

They adapt quickly and accept new ideas and products fast, instead of waiting to hear what others think about said products first (Rosen 2000, Fill 2005: 49-50). Blogs serve as social hubs, so their opinion leadership is based on the social status of the blogger (i.e. the number of readers). This social status means that readers are likely to be affected by the opinions of bloggers, especially when it comes to advertising. Fashion bloggers, for instance, contribute advertising content in various manners, the most common of which is by showing their outfits and listing the clothes they are wearing. While the bloggers are just trying to showcase their style, readers are often inspired by the bloggers and end up buying the same clothes. In this sense, the bloggers endorse the products they write about, be it intentional or not.

While Facebook and Instagram are popular among marketers due to the amount of buzz they can generate, many influencers on the Internet are still active on blogs in addition to microblogging. Influencers rely on blogs to provide more in-depth content to complement their Instagram feeds (Mediakix 2019). The relevance of blogs is also evident in the behavior of marketers: HubSpot's "State of Inbound 2018" global report on marketing found that 55% of marketers consider blog content creation to be a top inbound marketing priority – a large number for a media that is supposedly less effective at reaching consumers than microblogs and Facebook (HubSpot 2018).

1.3   Brands and blogs

The key concepts illustrated above help illuminate the main use companies have for blogs: if bloggers are opinion leaders whose endorsements serve as word-of-mouth, and consumers find word-of-mouth is more reliable than traditional ads, it should be possible for companies to affect the word of mouth by influencing the bloggers. Companies in the fashion industry are already starting to realize this, and are using product placement in personal blogs in order to generate positive WOMM. They send out free samples to bloggers and invite bloggers to different events in an attempt to generate amplified word of mouth (Borg, Branthammer & Olsson, 2007: 39). Sending out free samples is relatively inexpensive for a company, but if the

bloggers choose to endorse the products they receive, the company may end up generating a hype that would normally require expensive marketing efforts.

But not all marketers want to utilize bloggers as advertisers: some prefer to use bloggers as editorial outlets, similar to fashion magazines. David Lipman of the Lipman agency, whose many fashion clients include Diane von Furstenberg, and Burberry, finds traditional methods of blog marketing, such as product placement, sponsorships and advertorials disingenuous:

> "…if you force feed it like that, and you pay for it — bloggers have to make a living — but if you pay for it, it becomes an advertorial. Advertorials are the lowest form of advertising."

(Corcoran, 2010)

Lipman maintains that brand communication needs to be believable in order for it to be successful, and finds the strength of blogs lie in their honesty and the authenticity. While multiple mentions on a blog might move a bit of merchandise, the type of influence that cannot be measured statistically might be more significant for a brand (Corcoran, 2010). Indeed, some marketers prefer to let bloggers get closely acquainted with a brand, allowing them to understand the intentions and inner workings of the brand, finally creating unique, valuable content based on their observations.

1.3.1   Professionalization

The growing popularity of blogs has led marketers to recognize the potential of blogs in reaching large audiences. Bloggers exercise influence on their readers, and companies have started to harness this influence to market products, services and brands. Bloggers with large numbers of readers have begun to regard their blogs as successful sources of revenue, and as a result have been able to turn blogging into a profession. (Pihl & Wahlqvist: 2) This type of professionalization has been particularly common among fashion bloggers, as their writing has always centered around products and brands regardless of marketers' wishes.

According to Technorati Media's 2013 Digital Influence report, 64% of influencers said they made money from blogging. The majority of these 64% said they made less than 10 000 dollars per year, while only 10% of bloggers made more than 30 000 dollars per year (2013: 25). These influencers earned their revenue mainly from banner advertising (61%) and text ads (51%), but sponsored content and sponsored product reviews also ranked high (24% and 19%, respectively) (2013: 26).

While some bloggers negotiate collaboration fees on their own, some have taken the chance to organize: savvy business professionals have contacted well-known bloggers and gathered them under blog portals, which serve as hosts for the blogs of each blogger. A blog portal is essentially a website that packages different blogs together to "create a kind of one-stop shop for fashion blogs" (Kansara 2011). Bloggers move their blogs to these portals in exchange for a monthly salary, and sometimes an additional bonus when strong traffic is generated. The owners of these portals also serve as middlemen between bloggers and companies, organizing participation in marketing campaigns. Examples of these kinds of portals are the international *NowManifest* (originally founded by Swedish blogger Elin Kling and business partner Christian Remröd, later acquisitioned by Condé Nast/Fairchild Fashion Media), Scandinavian *Freshnet* and Australian *FELLT* (Kansara 2011, Lurie 2012).

In the United States, some of the most successful bloggers already have agents to represent them. Fashion blogging has become such a large business that entire agencies, such as the New York based *Digital Brand Architects*, have emerged to cater to the interests of fashion and lifestyle bloggers. Agencies known for representing models or Hollywood actors have also begun to express an interest in bloggers, with *Creative Arts Agency* signing the wildly popular Filipino blogger Bryan Boy. Agents do the negotiations on behalf of the bloggers, brokering endorsement deals with fashion labels, signing up advertisers and even booking television commercials for the bloggers (Kurutz 2011).

The professionalization of fashion blogs has led to a new form of publishing: rather than hoping to be featured as a writer in a magazine, bloggers can create that environment themselves. As Corcoran puts it, the modern fashion blogger can be "muse celebrity, stylist, editor and publisher all at once…and get

paid for it" (2010). There are numerous ways bloggers can use the power of their blogs, and the most successful bloggers have been able to capitalize on the offered marketing opportunities. Rather than becoming independent fashion editors, bloggers are taking the role of companies, building brands of their own. The name-recognition of a popular blog or blogger can be powerful enough that designers such as Marc Jacobs are willing to name products after bloggers, while companies offer monetary compensation just to get bloggers to appear at promotional events (Wicks 2012, Kurutz 2011).

Blogger Elin Kling's professional portfolio is an excellent example of monetizing on one's own brand: after rising to fame through her blog, Style By Kling, she has modeled for advertising campaigns with online shop Net-a-porter and Louis Vuitton. In addition, she has styled a runway show and campaign for Tibi, designed collections for H&M and Guess by Marciano, and served as design director of the clothing brand Nowhere. These days, she works as the fashion director of her own magazine, Styleby as well as online fashion site The Wall. (Adams 2011, Wicks 2012)

1.3.2   Risks of blog marketing

While the increasing degree of blogger professionalization might paint brand collaboration as an easy fit with brands tripping over themselves to hire bloggers, this is not really the case. While brands are not as apprehensive about working with bloggers as they used to be, these types of endeavors are hardly risk-free.

As the most influential fashion bloggers, such as Chiara Ferragni and Aimee Song, have 15 million and 5 million Instagram followers respectively (The Blonde Salad 2019, Bobila 2018), they are undeniably of interest when trying to reach large audiences in today's increasingly fractured media landscape. But while companies understand that bloggers help influence consumers' buying decisions, they find it difficult to let go of editorial control. Many brands still approach bloggers in questionable ways, offering free product samples while trying to dictate what bloggers write about said samples. Blogging is still a recent enough phenomenon that public relations representatives are struggling to extend bloggers the same courtesies as celebrities. According to Jennine Jacob, founder of the Independent

Fashion Bloggers network, brands that engage bloggers often expect radiant reviews, and fail to realize that bloggers are free agents who form opinions freely, not based on affiliation (Griffith 2012).

Furthermore, while brands are interested in the exposure bloggers can offer them, they are not necessarily willing to compensate bloggers in exchange for said exposure. Bloggers occupy a grey area when it comes to endorsement contracts, because while they can be compared to a talent like a celebrity, bloggers bring more than a name to the table: they offer a package of blog visitors, Twitter followers and Facebook fans (Griffith 2012). There is no clear model for compensation, and also no guarantee collaboration is going to pay off in the form of increased sales. Because bloggers want to work free of wording restrictions and exclusivity clauses, brands have no way of controlling marketing efforts, nor what bloggers will write about a brand. Brands worry that bloggers will jeopardize their image, and are unwilling to shell out if there is no guaranteed payoff. At the same time, bloggers who write about a product or a brand are providing the brand with a service, and are entirely right to demand compensation.

Brands still need to learn how to best approach bloggers in order to ensure successful partnerships. According to Karen Robinovitz, founder of Digital Brand Architects, brands still have long way to go in terms of trusting bloggers. As she states in an interview for *AdWeek*, "A blogger knows what will resonate with her audience, even if it means never capitalizing her 'i's" (Griffith 2012).

1.3.3   The issue of credibility

As fashion bloggers are becoming increasingly professionalized, they have also started to reap the benefits of treatment usually reserved for fashion editors, such as invitations to fashion week, along with front row seats at the fashion shows of significant designers. Former fashion journalist and style director of eBay, Constance White, stated when speaking at a panel on fashion blogging in 2006 that fashion used to be dictatorial, but that the impact of blogs was leading to the whole population "taking control and ownership of fashion" (Corcoran 2006). This sentiment was echoed in 2007 by the Pulitzer Prize–winning fashion writer and former blogger Robin Givhan, who in an article for Harper's Bazaar magazine

praised the fashion blog for democratizing the fashion industry (Pham). While fashion magazines were only published monthly, leaving readers waiting for reports on fashion shows, blogs were able to provide new content daily – as things happened. In contrast to the authoritative stance print media took to fashion, bloggers offered a fresh, personal point of view with no expectation of assent or compliance.

Furthermore, bloggers were beginning to make their way into territory that had traditionally been reserved for print, making fashion editors and journalists outraged that inexperienced bloggers were getting the same treatment as seasoned professionals (Pham 2011, Vogue 2016). As the attention given to fashion bloggers increases, so does the perceived threat to magazines. In fact, several editors of fashion magazines have voiced their displeasure with blogging practices over the past few years. Fashion critics and editors such as Cathy Horyn from the New York Times and Franca Sozzani from Italian Vogue have accused fashion blogs of lacking reporting and not being critical enough, especially in comparison to fashion magazines (Horyn 2011, Sozzani 2011). Vogue's (2016) dismissal of professional fashion bloggers as a "pathetic" and "embarrassing" group that "preen for the cameras" and are "bought-and-paid-for" brought the argument to a head.

As the professionalization of bloggers has largely been a result of blog marketing, journalists have been quick to point out the questionable ethics of using product placement in blogs and participating in sponsorship deals, particularly as there previously were no rules forcing bloggers to disclose whether they receive payment in exchange for their services.

Bloggers have been equally quick to defend themselves, calling out the hypocrisy of fashion journalists who constantly engage in similar product placement and sponsorship deals when writing magazine articles. Kathryn Finney of The Budget Fashionista also questioned the supposed objectivity of fashion journalists, claiming that because bloggers are their own bosses they enjoy more flexibility, which in turn allows them the freedom to criticize established names within the fashion industry. "If you're a junior writer at Vogue, you can't write a scathing review of Oscar de La Renta", added Finney (Corcoran 2006). When IMG Fashion Events, one of the main organizers of New York Fashion week, commented the event had been "swarmed with fashion bloggers, street-style

photographers and fashion fans" and informed the public they were going to restrict attendance to fashion events to representatives with strong connections to the fashion industry, blogger and stylist Renata Certo-Ware responded with an op-ed in *the Business of Fashion*. Certo-Ware reminded fashion professionals that "bloggers are a crucial part of the fashion ecosystem" who generate consumer interest and drive sales by translating and making fashion more accessible to the buying public (Certo-Ware 2014). The op-ed suggested the fashion industry should not be so quick to throw bloggers under the bus, as the popularity of a blog post can be effective at helping businesses predict consumer demand.

When discussing fashion blogs and advertising, two camps have emerged: those who criticize bloggers for lack of credibility and only being interested in making money, and those who defend bloggers and applaud them for their talent at generating interest in fashion. Representatives of the former camp tend to be journalists or other professionals within the field of fashion who feel their livelihood is threatened by bloggers, while the latter camp seems to consists of bloggers themselves, along with the readers, designers and brands that interact with bloggers.

Opponents of blogging have not been entirely wrong in painting blogs as problematic. Unethical marketing practices do occur in fashion blogs, and up until a few years ago, bloggers and business were rarely held accountable for said practices. The increased guerrilla marketing tactics outlined earlier in this chapter have, however, eventually led to changes in legislation and a call for greater disclosure. In 2009, the United States Federal Trade Commission set out new guidelines for advertising in social media, which are meant to protect consumers from guerilla tactics. The FTC guidelines dictate that bloggers must disclose any material connections or payments received in exchange for endorsements. Penalties for not complying can range from warning letters up to $11,000 fines per violation (Kang 2009).

While protecting consumers from product placement is important, legislators, researchers, journalists and businesses alike seem to be under the common misconception that bloggers will agree to anything in exchange for a paycheck. Taking bloggers' willingness to participate in marketing ploys for granted shows a lack of understanding for the medium of blogging and the

motivations behind it, and is one of the most frequent mistakes businesses make when approaching bloggers. Not all fashion bloggers are going to jump at the chance to write about a freebie, because in relationship between a lone freelancer and a large brand, the brand often comes out on top. Bloggers have as much to lose – if not more – as the businesses they co-operate with, because loss of credibility means a complete loss of the blogger's livelihood.

As fashion blogging has become more professionalized, bloggers face a greater demand for accountability and are beginning to feel a greater sense of responsibility towards their readers. Bloggers have become more guarded, which is reflected in their willingness to sign up with agencies and portals that help bloggers make advertising deals. Many fashion bloggers hope to maintain credibility with their readers by providing greater transparency and being more discerning with their choice in partnerships (Griffith 2012, Marwick 2013).

Personal blogs work as a type of self-representation of their authors (Gilly and Schau 2003), and provide considerable information regarding the blogger's opinions and values. These values affect the credibility and reputation of the blog, and help attract readers with similar values (Zhu & Tan 2007: 2). If the readers can identify with the bloggers, they are more likely to find these bloggers credible sources, as they are considered "one of us". The more strongly readers connect with bloggers, the more likely they are to take the bloggers' advice. This personal engagement is what makes blogs such a useful channel for marketing. (Dahlén; Corcoran, Marsden, Zorbach and Röthlingshöfer 2005: 155)

Because an informal style of writing increases the credibility of the blogger, the goal for marketers has been to get young adults to write about brands in their blogs, in their own words. But when posting about collaborations or brands in general, the language used and the justifications for these collaborations becomes of vital importance both to the bloggers themselves and to the companies they collaborate with. If readers feel that an endorsement on a blog seems like direct advertisement for a brand rather than an expression of personal opinion, the word of mouth effect is lost (Marwick 2013). Many brands have even garnered negative publicity when it surfaced they were paying bloggers to promote their products (Corcoran et al. 2005: 150). These types of actions lead to a considerable loss in credibility, both for the blogger and the business involved. Blogs are useful because

they represent a "refreshing and credible source of information" (Corcoran et al. 2005: 155). If this credibility is lost, the involvement of bloggers in the marketing process becomes futile.

1.4 Justification

As I have previously explained, blogging is a relatively new phenomenon and a subcategory of social media that has proliferated very quickly over the past ten years. The speedy growth of the blogosphere means that scholars are only just beginning to catch up with this development, as are businesses. While both researchers and marketers find blogging to be of interest, little attention has been given to marketing on personal blogs, especially from the bloggers' point of view. As marketing through blogs has become lucrative enough that bloggers are able to earn a living through engaging in such practices, now would be a good time to give more attention to the field of blogging and how marketing has affected it. Bloggers, marketers, scholars and consumers alike could benefit from more research being dedicated to the field of blog marketing, because the current playing field is so muddy no one knows exactly what the rules are.

Misconceptions about bloggers' willingness to engage in marketing have led to blog readers growing wary of blogs, and businesses wasting time and money because they fail to understand blogger motivations. According to Technorati Media's 2013 Digital Influence Report, the top branding pain points for influencers (such as bloggers) were brands' unwillingness to compensate influencers in exchange for their time, as well as the large number pitches received that were not relevant to their blog or audience (33).

Because promotional strategies developed by bloggers resonate better with target audiences than those developed by marketing professionals, marketers will need to learn how to best approach bloggers. While some partnerships between brands and bloggers have been successful, there are still risks involved with blog marketing, both for businesses and for bloggers. Bloggers who are inexperienced when it comes to the blog marketing run the risk of being duped by companies, providing a valuable service with no payback. At the same time, bloggers that do

not understand the mechanisms behind WOMM can seem disingenuous, harming marketing campaigns in the process.

As the method of delivery (the strength of the argumentation), the product involvement and the credibility of the blogger affect how the message is received, the effectiveness of the message is largely dependent on the blogger. Companies cannot necessarily control the message the blogger relays, but they can choose which bloggers they collaborate with. The research by Zhu and Tan (2007) as well as Chu and Kamal (2008) states that when measuring the effectiveness of blog advertising, it is not only the number of people the marketing message reaches that matters, but also the quality of the message and the trustworthiness of the endorser. This being the case, marketers would benefit from knowing what bloggers think about advertising, how they approach it and to what degree they understand the correlation between the credibility of the message and how it is received. Furthermore, researching blogger attitudes towards marketing could also help shed light on the issue of blogger credibility, answering the questions of whether bloggers can be trusted to write unbiased accounts. As I outlined earlier in this chapter, the trend within the fashion industry has been for designers to embrace bloggers as inexpensive marketing vehicles, while fashion journalists express scorn towards bloggers, deeming them unworthy competitors. Concerns about bloggers' ethics are motivated by journalists' desire to defend their status as uniquely qualified professionals, but also by public interest (Cenite, Detenber, Koh and Lim 2009: 577).

The issue of blogger credibility is particularly interesting. If bloggers are ever to be considered reliable news sources, surely some form of ethical responsibility must apply? Establishing exactly what attitudes fashion bloggers hold regarding blog marketing and ethics could help put questions regarding blogger credibility to rest, and possibly also change the way representatives of print media view bloggers. In short, increased transparency regarding blogger attitudes to marketing would not only benefit consumers and blog readers, but also the bloggers themselves – through earning the respect of their peers: fashion editors.

1.4.1   Previous research:

Academic research has mostly honed in on blogging through the context of social media marketing. Previous research has dealt extensively with the potential of marketing through social media (including blogs), outlining the risks and benefits of using blogs as marketing vehicles (Kozinets 1999, Dahlén 2005, Zhu and Tan 2007, Singh, Veron-Jackson and Cullinane 2008, Serazio 2010).

The majority of research into blog marketing has, however, mostly dealt with corporate blogging, examining blogs run by corporate representatives with the mission of promoting one particular brand or corporation. Such studies have explored corporate blogs as marketing vehicles, and how they can be used to create a dialog between customers and the company (Cass 2007). Less attention has been given to personal blogs, and how companies might harness the power of independent bloggers to help them in their marketing efforts, meaning that there is a gap in the research where this area is concerned.

Whenever personal blogs have been given attention in academic research, the focus has not been on marketing, but on the discourse used in blogs or the blog as a tool for representation and identity forming (Pham 2011, Chittenden 2010). When academic research does delve into marketing on personal blogs, the focus tends to be on how marketing is performed (be it the discourse used, WOMM or product placement) and the effect it has on consumers (see Corcoran et al. 2005, Wirtz and Chew 2002, Serazio 2010). Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner (2010) explored how marketers employed blogs to produce marketing narratives, and found that bloggers who used more transparent narrative strategies to promote products had the greatest impact on consumers, echoing the results of Zhu and Tan (2007) as well as Chu and Kamal (2008). The aforementioned research has helped clarify how WOMM appears on blogs and the ways it could be leveraged by marketers, but it does not explore the attitudes bloggers hold regarding said practices. Little attention has been given to bloggers' thoughts on marketing or their motivations for writing about brands or products.

Companies, researchers and journalists alike have tended to assume that all bloggers are willing participants in marketing ploys, or at least unwitting ones. The supposition regarding blog research has been that personal bloggers welcome

company collaborations with open arms, but there is little proof to support this way of thought. The research of Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright suggests the majority of people who write personal blogs do so for themselves. For most of these bloggers, the main reason for writing is to express a personal opinion concerning a certain area of interest, normally pertaining to daily life (2004a: 6). These findings indicate that bloggers should have very little interest in creating a dialog with companies, or helping companies reach potential customers. While exposure on blogs is undoubtedly of use for businesses, academic research has not yet examined how bloggers feel about giving this exposure. Because blog marketing can only work if bloggers agree to participate in it, it would be useful to map out blogger attitudes towards marketing practices.

Blogging ethics have been given some space in academia, with the research of Blood (2002) and Kuhn (2005, 2007) centering on proposing an ethics code for bloggers. Marwick (2013) explored the concept of authenticity as a self-representation technique within fashion blogging. Cenite, Detenber, Koh and Lim (2009) examined the ethical beliefs and practices of both personal and non-personal bloggers through an extensive online survey, which found that while most bloggers did assert a need for an ethics code, they valued truth-telling and attribution more than accountability. Personal blogging, however, is a wide sphere, and Cenite et al. themselves (2009: 591-592) recognize that as the blogosphere evolves and becomes more specialized, a need to investigate different types of bloggers might arise. As the Federal Trade Commission guidelines for bloggers took effect at the end of 2009, the research of Blood, Kuhn and Cenite et al. has unfortunately also become outdated. It is possible that bloggers might feel differently about blogging ethics and blog marketing practices since the imposing of the FTC guidelines, and therefore further investigation into bloggers' thoughts on marketing and ethics is still necessary.

From the standpoint of media research, determining what bloggers think about marketing also helps explain the motivation behind producing marketing content. While scholarly attention has been given to the effects of WOMM on blog credibility, this has always been examined from the marketer's or consumer's point of view. But what of the blogger? Exploring to what degree bloggers are aware of marketers' intentions and the effects blog marketing has on credibility could further

help gauge bloggers' willingness to participate in generating marketing content. Bloggers' awareness of marketing schemes may affect their willingness to participate, both in terms of learning what partnerships to avoid as well as knowing how to harness marketing to their advantage. As Kozinets et al. (2010) note, the degree to which bloggers indicate awareness of marketing strategy in their product endorsements correlates with consumer reactions to the perceived WOM, and therefore has an effect on its success.

Are bloggers just tools and unwitting marketers, or are they active participants that take advantage of the process? Knowing the answer to this question can help marketers determine how to best approach bloggers, and also inform blog critics and readers as to the trustworthiness of bloggers.

1.4.2   Why fashion bloggers?

What little academic attention has been given to blogs has mostly focused on the blogosphere in general, dividing it into non-personal blogs or personal blogs. Coverage of specific blog types has been limited mainly to political blogs. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on a portion of the blogosphere that appears to be underrepresented in academic research: fashion-themed blogs.

The reason I have chosen to focus on fashion blogs is threefold: fashion blogs show a high degree of professionalization, represent a different demographic than political blogs and are of personal interest to me, as a long-time follower of the fashion blogging phenomenon.

The fashion industry is one of the most fast-paced markets, and it constantly struggles with rapidly changing customer loyalty (von Maltzahn, 2009 :7-9). Though the number of fashion blogs does not make up a large portion of the blogosphere, these blogs have had a considerable impact on the fashion media and the larger fashion world (Pham 2011: 11). As I explained earlier in this chapter when discussing professionalization, fashion bloggers are becoming increasingly incorporated into various sectors of the fashion industry as commentators, models, stylists, designers and sometimes even as journalists. In September 2006, forty fashion bloggers received invitations for New York Fashion Week ("Style Coalition Takes Fashion Fans inside the Tents of Mercedes Benz Fashion Week for Third

Season" 2009), while in 2013 the number of bloggers attending had soared so high that the organizers of the event decided to limit attendance for future seasons (Blalock 2013). This makes fashion blogs a particularly fruitful area of research when it comes to blog marketing, as fashion bloggers are more likely to have encountered attempts to leverage their blogs for marketing purposes than bloggers within other fields.

Furthermore, researchers such as Minh-Ha Pham (2011) and Susan C. Herring and her colleagues (2004b) have argued that because research into blogs has largely favored political blogs, current studies on blogs present a skewed portrait of the blogosphere, painting it as predominantly male and white. By studying fashion blogs, I hoped to even the field by highlighting a portion of the blogosphere that is largely female and more ethnically diverse (Pham 2011), showing that technologically mediated communication is not just limited to adult males.

1.5   Focus

This thesis explores the attitudes fashion bloggers hold towards marketing on their personal blogs, focusing on issues of accountability and credibility.

1.5.1   Aims and scope

The purpose of this thesis is to bring transparency to blog marketing practices by establishing what bloggers think about engaging in said practices and how they might affect the credibility of bloggers. Blogger attitudes to marketing are examined by analyzing a survey sent to 350 bloggers. The focus of the thesis is placed on personal, fashion-themed blogs written in English.

1.5.2   Thesis structure

This chapter provided an introduction to blogging and marketing on personal blogs and presented justifications regarding the need for research within this area. This thesis comprises four chapters, the second of which will the methods and materials used to conduct my research. Chapter three will present the results of the data

analysis and provide discussion regarding the results. The fourth and final chapter will discuss the conclusion of my research and its implications, as well as limitations and suggestions for further research.

1.5.3   Hypothesis and research question

Based on my discussion of blog marketing and professionalization earlier in this chapter, my hypothesis is that most fashion bloggers do approve of advertising on their blogs, but enforce certain ethical limitations. Bloggers want marketing to happen on their own terms, and will not agree to marketers dictating the content of their blogs. In order to find out whether this hypothesis is accurate or not, I have formulated the following research question:

RQ1: What attitudes do fashion bloggers hold regarding marketing on personal blogs?

This question brings up more specific sub-questions that I will also attempt to answer in this thesis:

RQ 1.1: Do fashion bloggers consciously desire to be considered credible sources of information?

RQ 1.2: Are fashion bloggers aware of how blog marketing might affect their credibility?

RQ 1.3: Are there unspoken rules for fashion bloggers when it comes to blog marketing (i.e. are there types of marketing fashion bloggers will not take part in)?

RQ 1.4: Can businesses control or suggest the topics fashion bloggers write about?

2   Methodology

In this thesis, I set out to explore fashion blogger attitudes towards blog marketing. In 2012, which is when this thesis originated, blog marketing was not an area that had been extensively investigated. While mapping blogger attitudes to marketing was a topic in need of research, exploring these attitudes proved problematic. How do we define an attitude? Is it possible to infer the existence of attitudes when respondents are located in different countries? Finding the right method of analysis was the most difficult task, but trial and error finally pointed me in the right direction.

When deciding on a method for analysis, I was faced with choosing between quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research usually utilizes a large-scale set of data, usually numbers, and analyses them using statistical techniques (Blaxter et al. 2006, Braun & Clarke 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013: 3-4), quantitative research generates data that is broad but shallow. For quantitative research, there are typically many participants, but the data obtained from each participant does not contain a lot of complex detail. Quantitative research is well suited for describing and predicting phenomena when the aim is to generalize an outcome that applies to wider population. By contrast, qualitative research only occasionally produces findings that can be applied to a wider population – instead qualitative research is concerned with representing the views of study participants and explaining social behavior and thinking. (Yin 2015: 8-10)

Because I lacked the resources to acquire and analyze the large scale of data required for quantitative research, the qualitative method was a natural choice. The exploratory and in-depth nature of qualitative research was well suited for my thesis, as I was more interested in the *why* rather than *how many*. Schreier holds that "data never speaks for itself", but that we as researchers ascribe meaning to the data we collect (2012:2). As a long-time reader of fashion blogs, the topic was one that interested me, but also one I was quite familiar with. Had I decided on quantitative research, there was a risk I might not be sufficiently detached and impartial when analyzing the collected data – I might have tried to ascribe meaning to the data that was not there due to my own personal connection to the topic. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, values personal involvement and reflexivity, allowing room for

inductive reasoning – here my personal involvement and in-depth knowledge of the topic being researched was more likely to be a strength than a liability (Braun & Clarke 2013: 4).

Qualitative research involves comprehending the phenomenon that is being studied and allowing the data to lead to the emergence of concepts. In other words, the data is not just used to explore a theory – theory can also emerge from the data (Bradburn et al. 2004), Van den Hoonaard 2004: 40-44). While I had specific hypotheses I wanted to explore, I did not want the research questions to dictate the results so tightly there would be no room for unanticipated, emergent findings.

2.1   Research Method

Several methods of research were considered for the qualitative examination of attitudes, but a survey seemed the most efficient way to reach bloggers. As Kerlinger and Lee state, 'survey research has the advantage of a wide scope', allowing researchers to obtain information from a large population (2000: 613). While obtaining data from as large a set of participants as possible was not my main concern, I was worried the chosen research topic might encounter resistance from bloggers and therefore might not get many responses at all. To guard myself against this possibility, the survey was sent out to a large number of people. As questionnaires sent by mail tend to produce low returns (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000 :603), an online survey was chosen instead. Ironically, a wide scope can also be the downfall of a survey: a disadvantage of survey research is that depth is often sacrificed in order to allow for this large scope of information. As a result, the collected information rarely goes beyond the surface (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000: 613).

Luckily, the survey as a method does not have to yield responses that lack depth. Kerlinger and Lee suggest that this is an issue that can be avoided by designing survey questions so that they are specific and aimed at 'various facets of the problem' (2000: 604). The survey I developed was an analytical one, which ended up being a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions. Rather than focus on only numbers, census and direction, my research focused on causality. When asking questions, I hoped to find out bloggers' associations as well as

explanations for the attitudes they hold. The questions that I would describe a quantitative were designed to ease respondents into the survey, but also to provide some background on the participants – information I hoped would help inform my qualitative analysis.

While conducting interviews with a sample of fashion bloggers could have been an effective method, the geographical dispersal of the bloggers presented a significant challenge. Furthermore, one-on-one interviews are not always reliable, as participants might give disingenuous replies in an attempt to please the interviewer. When asking questions about sensitive subjects, respondents can often feel threatened by the questions or by the setting in which the questions are administered, making it difficult to get candid responses. While interviews can provide researchers with valuable in-depth information, the interview setting – which is strange and unfamiliar to most people – can in itself can cause respondents to impart ingenuous information in an attempt to please the inquirer (Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink 2004). Subjects that the respondents may perceive as sensitive are therefore best approached through nonthreatening means of data collection, such as surveys. According to Kerlinger and Lee, survey research is, in fact, best adapted to obtaining personal beliefs and attitudes (2000: 611-613).

A web survey allowed respondents to retain anonymity and ensured confidentiality, which I hoped would inspire more candid replies to sensitive questions regarding ethics and credibility. As Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink have noted, "self-administered computer-assisted procedures can reduce question threat and improve reporting on sensitive questions" (2004: 80). Administering the survey on the web was also a natural choice for reaching bloggers, because it is a familiar environment for blog writers. In addition, a web survey ensured ease-of-use, speedy replies, efficiency and relatively low costs compared to other survey methods. The survey provider used – Survs – also provided useful tools for analysis by keeping track of details – such as the amount of time spent on responding – and automatically generating graphs based on survey results.

Once the survey was constructed, a link to the survey was sent via e-mail to 350 fashion bloggers. As bloggers rarely post contact information besides their e-mail online, this was the only viable alternative for contacting bloggers.

2.1.1   Pre-testing

The inspiration for the thesis came from a previous research essay I had written on the subject of blog marketing for the course Business Communication II. For that particular essay, a web survey of 18 questions was sent out to 30 fashion bloggers of both British and American nationality. The survey included questions on bloggers' relationships to their readers, attitudes towards company collaborations, as well as the nature of the collaboration bloggers had participated in (Koivisto 2010). The survey received a total of five replies, from bloggers aged 19-30. While the response rate was not particularly high, this small survey served as base when I started to develop questions for the thesis survey, and the five bloggers who had replied to the survey functioned as a focus group. The results of the survey were examined in order to figure out which questions worked and which were redundant.

Prior to sending out the web survey to bloggers, a link to the first draft of the survey was also sent to the lecturers and participants of the Åbo Akademi pro gradu seminar in the fall of 2011. While the seminar participants were not the intended focus group of the survey, their comments and feedback further helped improve existing questions and eliminate unnecessary ones.

2.1.2   Questionnaire design

The survey consisted of 20 questions which are included Appendix 1, page 91-96 of this thesis. The set of questions contained a few quantitative questions and several qualitative ones, both closed and open-ended. The purpose of the quantitative questions was to warm up the respondents, but also to provide background information about the respondents, which would support and help analyze the quantitative questions. The quantitative questions dealt with the nationality and age of the respondents, but were also designed to find out how long respondents had been involved in blogging and how many readers they had. Bloggers who had been writing for long or had large numbers of readers were also more likely to have developed informed opinions regarding blogging practices.

The qualitative questions served as the meat of the research, and were designed to help explore blogger attitudes to blog marketing and the motivations behind these attitudes. These open-ended questions were to provide information not

only on the amount and type of blog marketing participation that occurred, but also with knowledge of why bloggers decided to co-operate with companies and whether they had any qualms about this practice. Most of the qualitative questions followed the quantitative background questions, but there were also shorter, yes-no questions leading into more in-depth ones.

There is plenty of literature on measuring attitudes, and most survey research tends to focus on attitude direction, meaning the proportion of people who hold favorable or unfavorable opinions (Krosnick and Abelson 1994:177). As my research focused on finding out what type of attitudes bloggers held and why, the how many was not of interest. The sampling of 33 bloggers was far too small to draw any general conclusions, so the focus was on the specific.

The meaning of the word *attitude* is, in itself, difficult to define. Kerlinger and Lee (2000: 712) define an attitude as 'an organized predisposition to think, feel, perceive and behave toward a referent or cognitive object'. Kerlinger et al. go on to explain that the desires, values and needs of a person influence their actions and attitudes, making an attitude 'an enduring structure of beliefs that predisposes the individual to behave selectively toward attitude referents' (2000: 603, 712). While an opinion refers to a view about a particular object, an attitude consists of a bundle of opinions and cannot really be separated from the person expressing them, as attitudes are an integral part of personality.

Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink further elaborate that attitudes 'exist only in a person's mind' as subjective states, and are therefore difficult to observe externally (2004:117). According to Bradburn et al., attitudes can be described in terms of consistency and clarity, but they cannot be verified as true or false (2004: 28, 117). Each research question and hypothesis set were explored through a cluster of several questions, which were designed to map respondents' thoughts around blogging and blog marketing. The revised edition of Norman Bradburn, Seymour Sudman and Brian Wansink's *Asking Questions* was used as a source of support when developing the questions used in the survey.

In addition to demographic variables such as age and nationality, the first section of the survey asked about bloggers' experience in reading and writing blogs, their blogging habits, the content of their blogs and their readers. Questions 5 and

6 asked bloggers about their motivations behind blogging as well as well as what the perceived purpose behind their blogs was, because these questions would shed light on whether bloggers had preconceived notions regarding fashion blogs or professionalization and marketing within the blogosphere.

The second section of the survey delved deeper into blogger attitudes, exploring how fashion bloggers view themselves in relation to the fashion industry and traditional fashion media. The questions in this section dealt with the rivalry between traditional fashion media and blogs, to further illustrate bloggers' thoughts in regard to credibility. As fashion bloggers have been under fire regarding lack of critical reporting, establishing bloggers' thoughts on the matter allowed me to explore the issue of credibility in more detail.

The third section of the survey focused on bloggers experience with and opinions on blog marketing and company collaboration.

The fourth and final section of the survey dealt with disclosure and credibility, asking bloggers about product placement practices and whether they believed these could affect their trustworthiness.

The most difficult part in developing the survey was determining a suitable number of questions and keeping the tone of the question's objective and neutral. As Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink state, respondents "must be persuaded to participate in the interview, and their interest (or at least patience) must be maintained throughout" (2004: 8). In forming the questions, it was important that my own attitudes regarding blog marketing did not shine through, and that respondents found the questions sympathetic and interesting enough to want to answer them despite not having anything tangible to gain. The only possible reward respondents might gain from replying to survey is, according to Bradburn et al., "some measure of psychic gratification". It seems the survey was successful in providing this for at least some of the respondents, as some spent a great amount of time forming coherent, well-thought out replies and explicitly expressed an interest in the topic of the survey. At the end of the survey some respondents commented they enjoyed the survey, and one person stated the questions "definitely delve into how society views fashion blogs, and I feel more people should know about this". While the response rate to the survey was roughly 9% with a final sample of 33

respondents, the bloggers who did respond gave reason to believe they did so not just to please the researcher who approached them, but because they appreciated an opportunity to state their opinions and relate their experiences regarding an issue close to their heart.

In *Asking Questions*, Bradburn et al. go into depth on the matter of threatening questions, noting that survey respondents tend to over report socially desirable behavior (2004:52-53). They go on to say that "respondents may be motivated not to tell the truth because of fear of consequences or because they want to present themselves in a favorable light" (2004: 30)." The problem in decreasing the threat of survey questions was the difficulty in determining which questions could be deemed threatening and what type of social behavior might be considered undesirable when it comes to blogging. The most popular fashion bloggers are able to make a living on blog marketing practices alone, indicating that participation in blog marketing is socially accepted in the blogosphere. On the other hand, bloggers have come under fire from traditional media for "accepting bribes" and not being critical enough in their reporting (Vogue 2016). As guerilla marketing in blogs has become so common that the United States passed legislation forcing bloggers to disclose sponsorship, fashion bloggers and their practices are under increased scrutiny (Kang 2009). Against this backdrop, it seemed safe to assume that the parts of the survey that dealt with credibility and disclosure of participation in marketing activities could be perceived as threatening by bloggers.

When asking potentially threatening questions that dealt with complex attitudes, such as questions 16-17 (which explored the bloggers' motivations behind participating in blog marketing), Bradburn et al.'s method of breaking questions down into a series of simpler unipolar questions was employed. Questions about socially undesirable behavior (such as participation in blog marketing and lack of disclosure) were left open, as open questions are usually more successful in obtaining information (Bradburn et al. 2004: 80).

Question 7 asked bloggers whether it was important for them that their readers value the blogger's opinion, and to elaborate the reasoning behind their answer. This question was designed to determine whether bloggers considered themselves opinion leaders and whether they thought credibility in the eyes of their readers mattered.

Questions 10-15 asked bloggers about their opinions and experiences with blog marketing, mapping out the types of marketing activities bloggers had participated in. These questions were designed to find out whether the respondents felt any apprehension about participation in these activities, and whether there was a type of marketing practice they would not consider participating in.

2.2   Sample

The sample consisted of English-speaking bloggers from around the world. A web link to the survey was sent to 350 different bloggers through e-mail, at addresses posted publicly on their blogs. The e-mail explained the purpose of the survey and encouraged bloggers to complete the survey, promising all participants would remain anonymous. While a snowball sampling technique (i.e. asking bloggers to forward the survey link to their acquaintances) could have helped me reach an even larger number of bloggers (possibly also resulting in a higher response-rate) I opted not to employ this method, because it would not have allowed me to control that participants fulfilled the selection criteria. The final sample consisted of 33 bloggers.

2.2.1   Sample selection

I decided to study the largest fashion blogs, and used a blog-tracking website called *Bloglovin* to identify the largest blogs. Blogs were also found through links in blogs and through well-known blog portals, such as Independent Fashion Bloggers, *Freshnet* and *Nowmanifest*. Bloglovin functioned as the primary source of data, as the site was able to rank blogs according to their subject matter and popularity. The reason for focusing on the largest fashion blogs was the assumption that the writers of these blogs were more likely to have attracted attention from stakeholders, and were therefore also more likely to have experience regarding the practice of blog marketing.

As the focus of the thesis was the English-speaking fashion blogosphere, the criteria for the sample was that main language of the blog had to be English, and the focus of the blog had to be style or fashion. Some bloggers write their posts in more than one language, providing a translation or summary in a different tongue. I reasoned that for the main language of the blog to be considered English, the post

had to begin in said language, and the amount of English text per post had to be equal or greater than the amount of text in the secondary language (often French or Spanish). For a blog to qualify as a fashion or style blog, it had to include the words 'fashion' or 'style' in its description, or be categorized with at least one of the aforementioned on Bloglovin. The content of the sample blogs was checked and analyzed for at least five pages back, in order to determine whether the blog truly fit the defined category (i.e. discussed fashion our outfits and possibly included images matching these themes).

An additional criterion for selection was that the number of blog followers had to be more than 200, as the assumption was that bloggers with a readership below that number were unlikely to have been blogging for very long or have much experience regarding blog marketing. The number of followers was determined through checking the "followers" section in Bloglovin or on the actual blog, or through visit counters on the blog. If none of these methods revealed information about the followers, blog posts were checked for the number of comments. If the number of comments on a post reached the mark of 300, the blog was considered to fit the criterion.

The blog also had to be text-based (to differentiate from audio or image-based blogs) and not be used for other purposes besides blogging. While most fashion blogs are indeed heavy on the use of images, I wanted to make sure images were not the sole content of the blog. In order to ensure the blog was active, the blog had to have at least two pages worth of entries and had to have been updated within the past two weeks. Finally, the blog had to contain a contact e-mail address or contact form to which a link to the survey could be sent. Once a sufficiently large sample of blogs had been collected, bloggers' email addresses were extracted from their blogs.

2.2.2   Participants

The invitation e-mail was sent to 350 fashion bloggers, out of which 69 bloggers participated in the survey, and 33 bloggers fully completed the survey. The 33 bloggers were the age range of 18 to 35 and hailed from the United States, the

United Kingdom, Australia, Belgium, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Norway, Finland, Romania and Singapore.

2.3   Procedure

The survey was administered to bloggers on 14th February 2012 and the two following days (in the form of invitation e-mails). The e-mail containing the link to the survey, along with the first page of the survey informed participants about the survey and for what purposes it was to be used, assuring confidentiality according to the principle of informed consent (Bradburn et al. 2004: 14-17).

2.4   Data collection and analysis

Most of the surveys were completed within the first week of the survey launch. The data collection period was limited to approximately four months and concluded on 1 July 2012. By this time, the number of surveys completed had declined to a few per week and the number of responses obtained was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this thesis.

2.4.1   Quality standards

Kerlinger and Lee (2004) attribute the greatest advantage of survey research to the fact that it is possible to check the validity of survey data, though this may be a possibility reserved for quantitative surveys rather than qualitative ones. The survey distributed for this thesis contained a few quantitative questions, which – in addition to providing background information about the respondents – were used to determine the reliability of the responses, as the reliability of factual items is considered high. In order to weed out any possible sampling errors, safety checks were built into a study in the form of the aforementioned introductory questions, which verified that respondents fit the sampling criteria and did indeed actively blog and had more than 200 followers.

Checking the reliability of attitude responses proved more difficult, because it is nearly impossible to verify questions about attitudes that exist only in the minds of the individuals concerned (Bradburn et al. 2004: 28). Fortunately, fashion

bloggers are a notoriously open crowd, who are very willing to share their views with the public. The views expressed by prominent fashion bloggers in interviews and on their blogs were compared to the results of the survey, using this outside criterion to check the reliability of attitude responses.

The data was also screened by checking the responses to surveys that were completed very quickly (e.g. ten minutes and below) and very slowly (e.g. 30 minutes and beyond) for logical consistency. The following screening criteria were set for the data, based on the results of the pilot study and the metadata of the final survey:

- Responses that were not completed were excluded (i.e. responses where respondents skipped compulsory questions)
- Responses that did not have unique IP-addresses were excluded
- As the average time spent completing the survey was 18 minutes, survey responses that were completed in a total time of less than five minutes were excluded

A total of 33 survey responses passed all of the above screening criteria, while 36 responses were removed during data cleaning (most of these were respondents that opened the survey for less than a minute and did not respond to any of the questions). While the response rate for the survey was barely 10 per cent, this is not to be considered a sign of disinterest on part of the bloggers for the issues explored in the survey. As Bradburn et al. note (2004: 19), "participation in surveys is more a function of the potential respondents' general attitude toward surveys than of the content of a specific survey". As fashion bloggers are routinely bombarded with e-mails, refusals to participate were likely to occur due do time pressure.

2.4.2   Thematic Analysis

Qualitative content can be analyzed in a number of different ways. Researchers can choose to make their analysis solely content-based, but they can also choose to perform analysis based on theory, interpreting the results of their research in relation to existing theory within the field of research. Because very little research has been done on the topic of blogger attitudes to blog marketing, there was not enough existing theory to utilize when interpreting my results. Content-based

analysis was therefore the natural choice when faced with the task of dissecting the results of the survey.

In deciding on how to analyze the collected data, I settled on a form of qualitative content analysis known as thematic analysis, which has been developed and detailed by Braun and Clarke, described as a "poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged yet widely used qualitative analytic method" (2006: 77)". Ayres (2008: 876) describes thematic analysis as "a data reduction and analysis strategy by which data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within a data set".

Thematic analysis is a flexible type of analysis that can be applied across a range of theoretical approaches and can be used to answer a multitude of research questions. Essentially, this method relies on deep familiarization with the collected data – reading the data over and over, slowly trying to derive meaning and patterns. The method relies on coding, i.e. grouping and labelling data in order to recognize patterns that are developed by the researcher into themes (Braun and Clarke 2013: 178, Grbich 2013: 261).

Thematic analysis is described as a useful research method for novices of qualitative research, because it offers student researchers a chance to learn the basics of coding and data-handling despite not having a deep knowledge of theoretical constructs. (Braun and Clarke 2006:178). Braun and Clarke state that "good qualitative analysis is primarily a product of an analytic sensibility, not a product of 'following the rules' ", by which they mean that a person performing this type of analysis should possess an analytic sensibility and be able to provide meaning to data by recognizing patterns that go beyond the surface-level content of the data (2006: 201).

According to Braun and Clarke (2013: 210-211, 224), a code is a phrase or word that captures a single idea – the essence of what is interesting in that bit of collected data. Codes combine to form themes. A theme is broader and can consist of several ideas or codes, but each of these relate to a central organizing concept that defines the theme. A theme can also be described as some form of pattern found within the data set that is relevant to answering the research question. (Braun and Clarke 2006: 82) Bernard and Ryan (2003) suggest that potential sources for themes

could be repetition, meaningful terms from the data and participants' causal explanations for events, among others.

Coding can be performed either through selective coding or complete coding. Selective coding focuses on data reduction: identifying instances of the phenomenon being researched and selecting these out. Complete coding involves identifying anything or everything within the entire data set that is of relevance to answering the research question. In this approach, all of the data that is relevant to the research question is coded and the researcher does not become selective until further on in the analytic process (Braun and Clarke 2013: 206). Complete coding is described as a good method for student researchers, whereas selective coding is considered a more useful approach for more experienced researchers that have wider theoretical knowledge to rely on when performing selection.

Braun and Clarke found that qualitative survey data poses "unique and particular challenges for identifying patterns", due to the short responses and the question-based structure of the data, where the questions themselves tend to dominate, particularly if you collate data by question (2013: 225, 226-227). For this reason, I chose complete coding as my method of labelling data, so as not to exclude any emergent results due to too heavy a reliance on questions. I began my analysis by immersing myself in the data, familiarizing myself with the survey replies and making note of repeating patterns or items that could be of relevance to my research questions. These notes became the initial building blocks in my process of coding. I approached coding in an emergent, data-driven way going through the material multiple times, slowly developing a code framework from the dataset. I had some preordained notions regarding my hypothesis, so some of the codes were derived in a more concept-driven way, based on the existing literature (in this case articles and interviews with fashion bloggers). I assigned each reply with one or more codes, but began to develop more codes the further I got in my data, prompting me to repeatedly revisit earlier sections of data to check for consistency in my coding.

Once all of the material had been coded, the data were collated in a separate file and grouped by code. Relevant quotes that helped develop the code or that contradicted the code were marked – contradicting extracts were moved to form their own codes.

Certain patterns could be recognized when analyzing the code. Some codes overlapped or seemed closely related, while others served as the opposites of each other. Together, some codes formed coherent themes with an organizing concept that unified the data extracts. As the analysis advanced, more and more themes could be recognized, allowing unifying codes to be grouped into separate, themed sections – candidate themes. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest dividing themes into overarching themes, subordinate themes and subthemes in order to identify the relevance of themes. A thematic map was developed from these candidate themes, in order to clarify the relationships between the themes. The map revealed that some of the candidate themes were unclear and needed to be developed further. Themes that lacked a clear, central organizing concept or seemed too messy were revisited and cleaned so only the codes that clustered around central concepts remained. Eventually, some of the candidate themes were dropped completely from the results.

Theme importance was decided not based on the frequency of the theme, but based on whether the pattern described by the theme was meaningful in answering the research question of the thesis. Themes that did not provide a coherent picture of dominant patterns or did not have clear boundaries were excluded. Finally, the themes were reviewed and the most illustrative extracts of the data were picked out to be used in describing and reporting the themes. Hirsijärvi and Hurme (2001: 136) hold that the rich and complex nature of qualitative content is usually best represented by preserving the content in its original verbal form. In quoting extracts of the data, I have attempted to stay true to the original content, but where necessary the extracts have been cleaned up to avoid repetition.

3   Analysis

The participants of the survey were 33 fashion bloggers in total. The responses varied both in length and in form depending on the respondent. Some of the bloggers who participated in the survey gave very thoughtful, elaborate answers, while others kept their replies short and to the point. Experience seemed to factor into the length of the replies, as those of the bloggers who had been writing for long periods of time gave slightly longer replies than newer bloggers. The nationality, age and experience of the bloggers showed no particular regularities in correlation to the attitudes they displayed, but the number of followers a blogger had did seem to have some effect on attitudes. The bloggers with a larger readership were less strict when it came to disclosing sponsorship, whereas those with fewer readers showed a stronger preference towards transparency.

3.1   Demographics

All of the 33 bloggers in the sample were female. This ratio is not surprising, considering female writers still largely dominate the fashion blogosphere. Out of the 10 most popular fashion bloggers actively writing today, only Bryan Boy is male (Sherman 2013). Unfortunately, the lack of male respondents renders it difficult to draw conclusions regarding behavioral patterns based on gender.

The majority of the respondents (21) were 18-25 years old. The second biggest age group represented by the sample was 26-30 years, while only a few respondents were older than 30. One respondent was under 18 years of age.
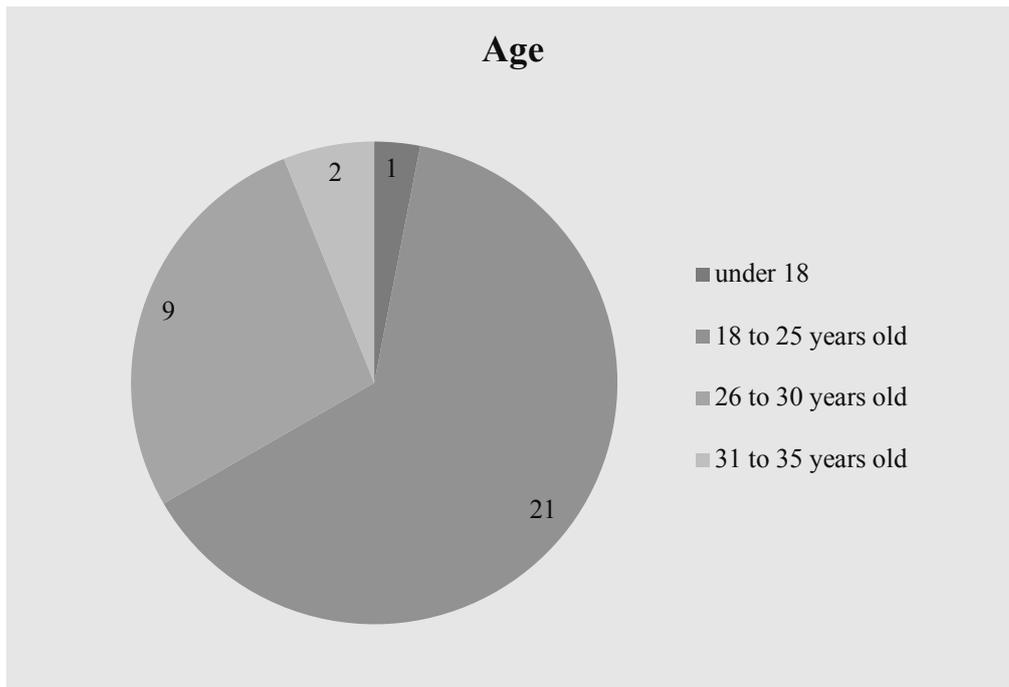
Figure 1: Respondent age

Fourteen of the bloggers who replied were from the United States, but a many other countries were represented as well. In addition to the English-speaking areas of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, bloggers from Belgium, Finland, Hong Kong, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and Singapore also filled in the survey. Twelve of the sampling had been blogging for three years or longer, eight for between 2-3 years, and eleven for 1-2 years. Based on the criteria set for the sample (that bloggers should have at least 200 followers or unique visitors), it was no surprise that participants had been actively blogging for a long period of time. The variation exhibited regarding the experience of the respondents seemed to correlate slightly with the number of readers the respondents had: nine had over 10 000 readers, five had between 5000 and 10 000 readers, and 6 had between 1000 and 5000 readers.

Country of origin

14

6

3   3

1   1   1   1   1   1   1

Australia   Belgium   Finland   Hong Kong   Norway   the Netherlands   Portugal   Romania   Singapore   United Kingdom   United States
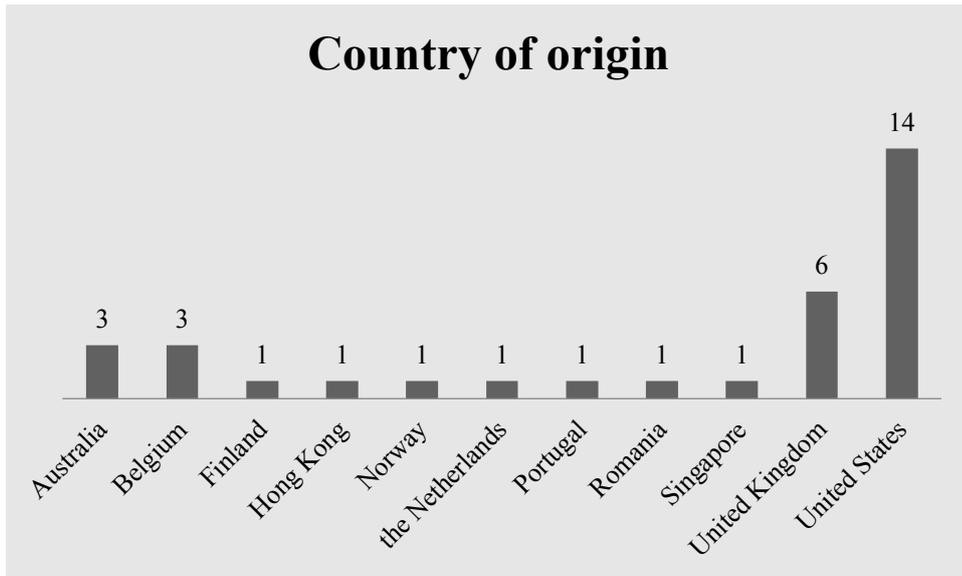
Figure 2: Respondents' country of origin

Experience

12

11

8

2

0

| Less than 6 months (0%) | more than 6 months but less than 1 year | more than 1 year but less than 2 years | more than 2 years but less than 3 years | 3 years or longer |
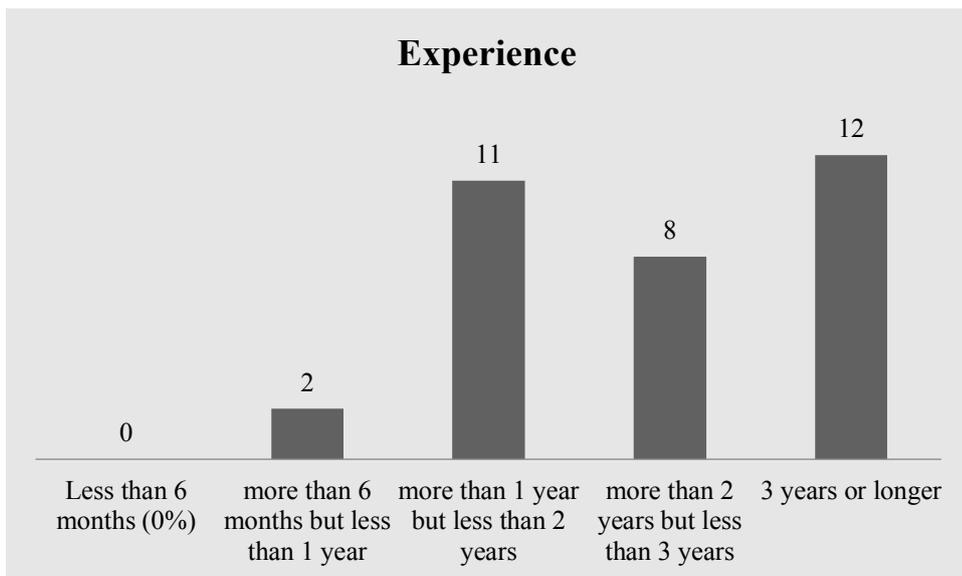
Figure 3: How long respondents had been blogging
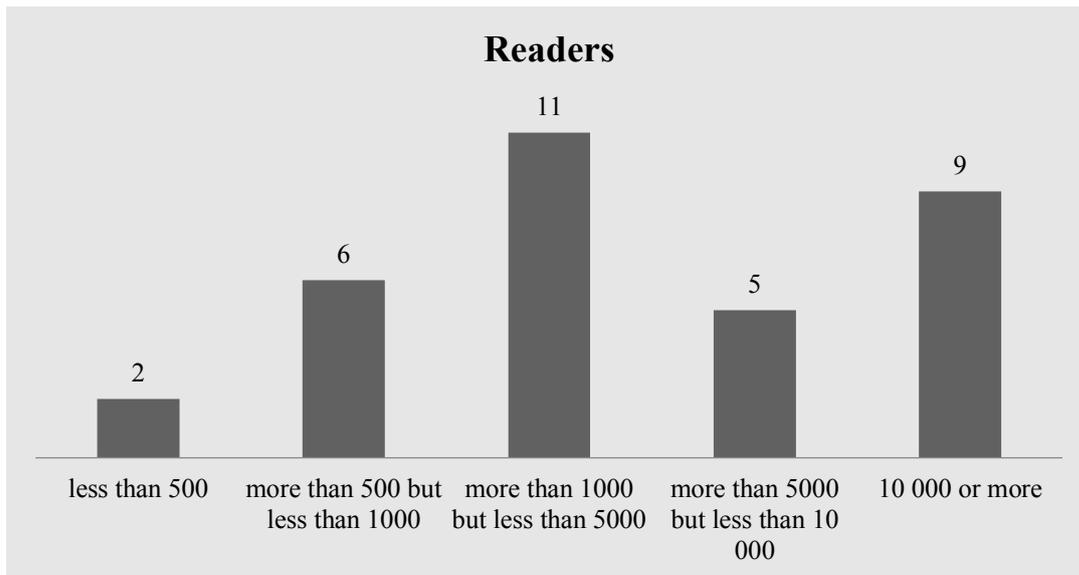
Readers

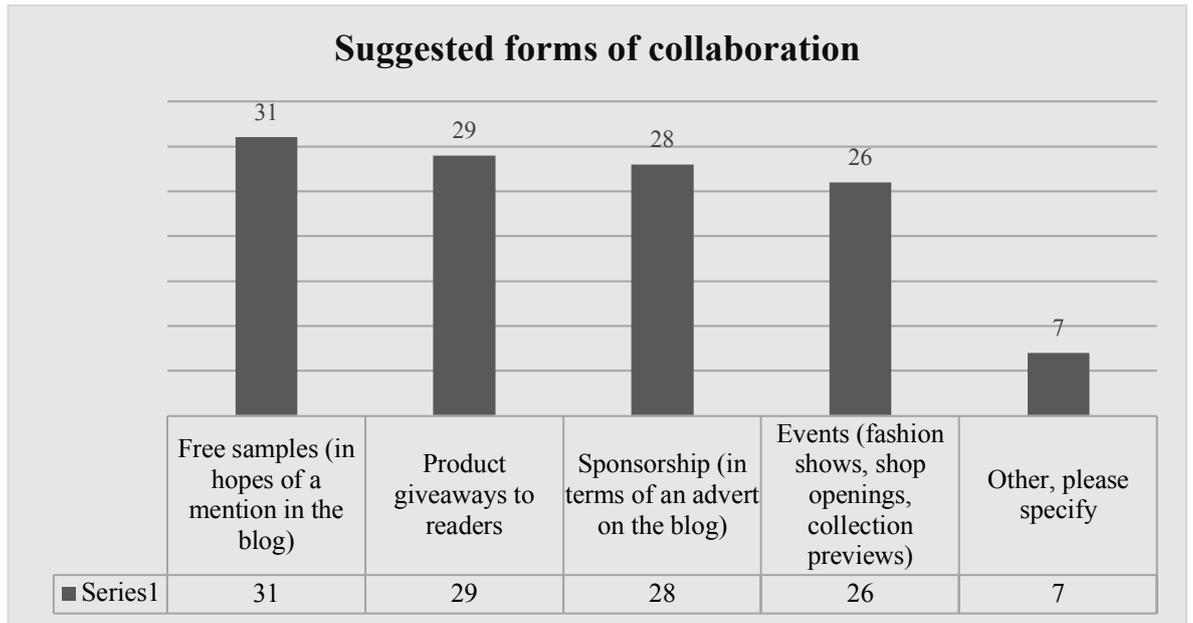**Figure 4:** Number of blog readers

3.1.1   Respondent experience with blog marketing

While the aim of my research has been to provide qualitative answers rather than quantitative, I feel that some further quantitative elaboration is in place, in order to better understand the background of the respondents. I mainly wish to describe the respondents' experience with blog marketing, in order to address possible questions regarding whether inexperience with said subject might affect the results.

The most common form of collaboration suggested to respondents was that of sending free product samples. This type of collaboration had been suggested to all of the bloggers who had been approached. All of the bloggers who had been offered free samples had also agreed to accept samples. Respondents were also not particularly averse to accepting free products that were to be handed out to readers. Product giveaways had been offered to 29 of the respondents, and 27 had accepted these types of giveaways.

Sponsorship in the form of an advert had been suggested to 28 of the respondents, but fewer had agreed to this type of collaboration. 22 of the bloggers who had been approached about advertisements had agreed to them. 26 of the bloggers had been invited to sponsored events, such as fashion shows, shop openings or collection previews, and 23 of the invited bloggers had also attended such events. Seven of the bloggers had also been offered other forms of

collaboration, including paid airfare to visit company headquarters, brand ambassadorship, designing products, payment in exchange for writing about a company, styling (either in the form of personal styling, styling a photo shoot or styling a look book), traveling to New York City to model for a shop's look book. One blogger had even received a purchase offer for her blog.

Suggested forms of collaboration

	Free samples (in hopes of a mention in the blog)	Product giveaways to readers	Sponsorship (in terms of an advert on the blog)	Events (fashion shows, shop openings, collection previews)	Other, please specify
■ Series1	31	29	28	26	7

Figure 5: Types of collaboration suggested to respondents

Participation in collaboration

|	None	Accepted free samples	Accepted product giveaways to readers	Sponsorship	Events (fashion shows, shop openings, collection previews)	Other, please specify
■ Series1	0	31	27	22	23	6
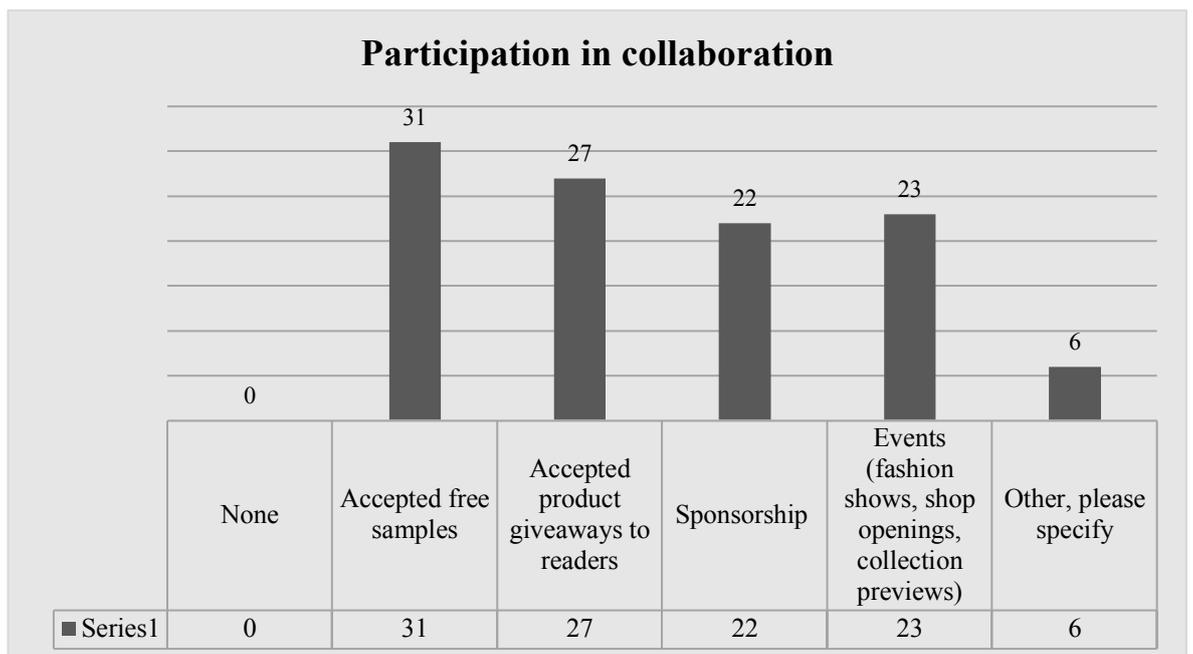
Figure 6: Types of collaboration respondents had participated in

43

3.2   Themes

In this chapter, we move from the broader, overarching themes to the specifics by first illustrating what attitudes manifest themselves, and then explaining the 'why?' behind these attitudes. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 180) identify the loss of individual participants voices as a possible weakness of thematic analysis, I have tried to illustrate the survey respondents' thoughts around themes through extracts from their responses. The origins of the extracts used has been checked, in order to ensure no particular participant voice ended up dominating the interpretation of the results. Participants are identified using the data ID-codes assigned to them through the survey provider. Due to the large number of participants quoted (over 20), I have chosen not to give them pseudonyms or other identifying features, as this seemed to complicate identifying this particular set of participants rather than humanize them.

Close examination of the data revealed two main constructions of core characteristics of fashion blogging in relation to marketing – an ambitious, collaboration-sympathetic approach and personal, self-expressive approach. Participants displayed positive or at the very least neutral attitudes to third party marketing on fashion blogs. The main difference was to be found in *the way* they thought marketing ought to be performed. These core characteristics of fashion blogger attitudes to marketing form two overarching themes, *business is business* and *keeping it real*. The former manifested in a view of blogging as a profession and marketing as a quid pro quo. The latter captured a way of viewing blogging through a personal lens rather than professional one, either as a creative outlet or a form of social interaction. Both overarching themes were connected in that neither exhibited particularly negative views regarding blog marketing, but the themes differed in degree of willingness to engage in marketing practices.

Theme chart
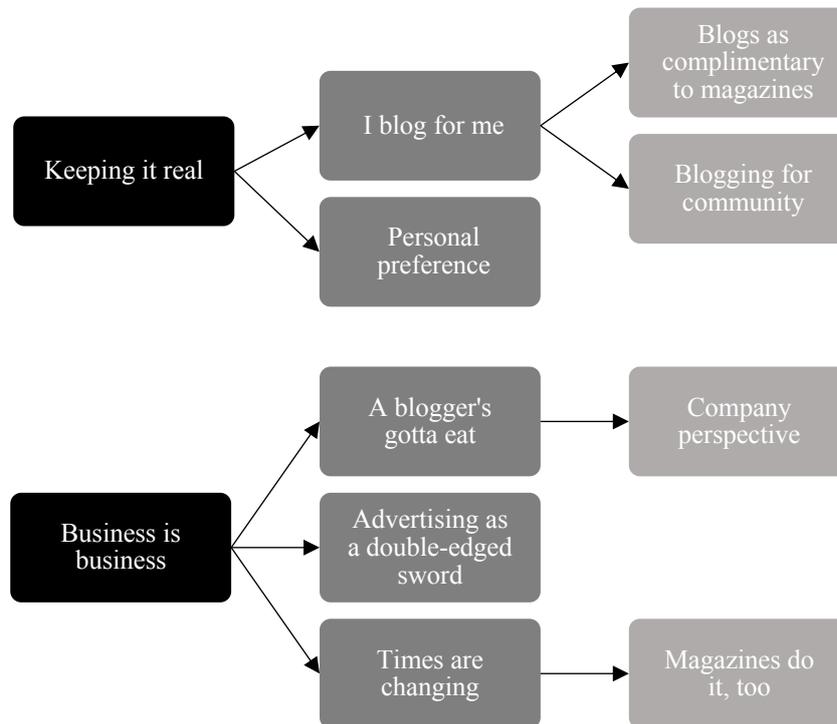
Figure 7: Theme chart

3.2.1   Business is business

'Business is business' is an overarching theme that captures positive attitudes towards blog marketing as the result of a professional, business-like approach to blogging. The theme captures the way in which bloggers talk about advertising, constructing it not as something evil nor something to idealize, but rather as a transaction, a quid pro quo. Bloggers discussed what was to be gained through engaging in blog marketing, considering the benefits and pitfalls from both the perspective of a writer or influencer trying to make a living as well as from the perspective of the companies that hoped to collaborate with bloggers.

I identified in the data a picture of ambitious writers who started blogging either out of a desire to make it a profession, as a way to promote their business or to promote themselves and their skillset within the fashion industry (some ran thrift shops and used their blogs to market their selection). Their responses signaled an educated understanding of commercial practices and an awareness of the reasons

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why companies approach them. The data also revealed an interest on the part of bloggers in fostering relationships with businesses, though respondents produced accounts that underlined that they would only engage in advertising if there was palpable gain.

Not all of the respondents captured within this theme aspired to become professional bloggers – though these respondents asserted a firm belief that fashion blogging could and should be considered a serious profession for those that were so inclined. *Business is business* captures the way in which bloggers discussed blogging through a clearly ambitious lens, be it a desire to work within the fashion industry or a desire to influence others. Participants portrayed blogging as a serious endeavor, all the while contrasting themselves against other, less serious bloggers who considered blogging a hobby. Some bloggers positioned themselves higher up within an unspoken fashion hierarchy, criticizing hobbyists for a willingness to accept anything sent their way, as seen in this comment by 33 "[..] I highly value integrity in blogging. I blogged for 2 whole years before I made a single cent. and I still say no to a huge amount of advertising and campaigns for the integrity of my blog. I hope other bloggers would do the same"[1]. The way "other" bloggers were discussed implied a desire for blogging to be considered a serious profession and for bloggers to be considered produces rather than just consumers – worthy participants of the fashion ecosystem. Bloggers furthermore positioned themselves as competitors to fashion magazines, articulating a desire to disrupt who gets to be a leading authority on the topic of fashion and questioning the assumed impartiality and critical reporting ability of fashion journalists.

I identified three themes and several subthemes within this overarching theme: 1) *A bloggers gotta eat* captures the idea of marketing on blogs as a necessary part of blogging professionally, i.e. a way of making ends meet. The subtheme *company perspective* describes a tendency on part of bloggers to consider blogging and marketing from the perspective of the companies. 2) *Times are changing* captures an implicit model of bloggers as disruptors entering the fashion industry and replacing the role of magazines in fashion media; within this, the sub-theme *magazines do it, too* highlights the way in which bloggers justify engaging

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[1] The quotations from blogs are presented as is, and may therefore contain grammatical errors.

in blog marketing through calling out magazines for participating in similar forms of marketing. 3) *Advertising as a double-edged sword* encompasses discussion of advertising as both something desirable and good but potentially harmful to business. Within this theme, blog marketing is discussed as something to be navigated and managed through means of transparency and moderation.

3.2.1.1 A blogger's gotta eat

'A blogger's gotta eat' captures the construct of fashion blogging as form of employment and marketing as means to an end. A very pragmatic approach to third party marketing on fashion blogs can be identified in the data, where bloggers consider advertisements and product placement as a business transaction that should benefit both parties. Within this construct, a very neutral attitude to marketing emerges. Respondents discussed blog marketing as a normal part of fashion blogging and expressed no aversion to being approached by companies, positioning themselves as willing participants. Free samples and advert revenue were discussed as a form of salary and an incentive for writing:

> "Everyone has a job, some just receive money in different ways" (49)

> "I get free stuff, so of course, I'm going to like this practice. I love my blog, but it's a whole lot of work to keep up. If there weren't incentives like this I probably wouldn't have stuck with it as long as I have". (54)

Common in the data is an implicit (and sometimes explicit) construct of fashion blogs and companies being in a symbiotic relationship – both need each other in order to thrive. 41 comments:

> "[…] let's not forget, for blogs that garner a lot of traffic, those advertisements can pay the bills."

Here, again, advertising is described as a way to earn one's keep, but further positioned as a facilitator or even a necessity for blogging. Large amounts of traffic to a website translates to more server traffic and increases hosting costs to sums that bloggers with a large readership might not be able to pay for themselves. In other words, while some bloggers might have an internal drive towards professionalism, popularity also forces bloggers to engage in advertising (and therefore take a more professional approach to blogging) if they desire to continue the practice of

blogging. This dual drive is interesting, because it continues to develop the relationship between bloggers and companies, pushing them closer towards each other. Companies use fashion blogs to reach consumers they might not reach through traditional media, while bloggers use company collaborations as compensation for their work.

Some responses indicated a wariness towards the practice of sending out free product samples to bloggers, but not due to considering advertising inherently evil. Instead, the wariness seemed to stem from not considering free samples proper compensation for the amount of work contained in writing a product review, as detailed by 32:

> "It's actually harmful to bloggers trying to make their blog a business. Free product is not payment for a blog post or review. It's very cheap for companies to send out product but a blogger can't work for product – you can't pay rent with free shoes."

This extract helps illustrate the quid-pro-quo nature that some fashion bloggers attach to blog marketing, but also implicitly hints towards a desire to be considered professional: payment validates blogging as a profession. This reciprocal nature is further reflected in the way fashion bloggers discuss expectations in relation to collaboration. These thoughts are nicely articulated in 69's comment:

> "I think that so long as it's relevant to the blog content and so long as they accept that if it's not a good product, a blogger has every right to say so, then it's fine".

Professionally minded bloggers seemed to have some defined ground rules, one which was to only write about content that fit the style and content of the fashion blogs.

The data revealed a willingness on part of bloggers to accept most free samples received, with the caveat that there should be no strings attached. Some mentioned that companies seemed to think that a free product was automatically going to translate into a glowing review, but respondents drew a clear line in terms of reciprocity: they would not write about a product or brand if it did not align with the content of their blog. This implies a tension that underpins advertising on blogs, revealing that bloggers implicitly do consider some forms of blog marketing as unsavory.

Marketing in itself is not seen as evil, but the discussion of what collaborations to accept clearly skirts the issue of credibility – professionalized bloggers are aware that if they write about any brand that approaches them, it will affect their integrity in the eyes of their readers and therefore the business of blogging. Fashion blogging as a profession seems focused on content alignment as the defining criterion in terms of integrity – less attention is given to disclosing collaborations to readers. A few bloggers even pointed toward the amount of payment as a motivating factor in choosing what collaborations they participate in, as illustrated by 28's account of selection criteria:

> "[…] if it matches my content, and very importantly too: how much they pay me. […] When the content stays inspirational, i see no issues."

Comments like this one point toward the idea that content is king – not honesty. Integrity is constructed as something that is implied through the choices made by the blogger, indicating an assumption that readers will be able to discern when a blogger is being honest in their writing.

Company perspective

A sub-theme found in the material is that of *Company perspective*. The data contained some discussion of fashion blogs from the perspective of companies, even though this point-of-view was not inherent in the questions posed to the participants. A small group of bloggers revealed a tendency to consider marketing from both the perspective of the blogger and the perspective of the company, displaying that they were quite aware of the motivations of companies in approaching fashion bloggers and sympathetic to entrepreneurs. This sympathy is perhaps best illustrated in a comment by 17, describing blog marketingin the following way :

> "[…] it's a positive move to introduce emerging designers, which don't have a lot of advertising budget so instead, they do PR (engaging bloggers)".

Blog marketing was constructed as a shrewd move for companies and an efficient way to reach online audiences, indicating an awareness of blog's potential as marketing platforms.

When discussing the practice of sending free samples of products to bloggers, some respondents intimated concern on behalf of the companies engaging in these practices, indicating that they thought of the company's return on investment:

> "I think it works out for the companies and sometimes works out for the bloggers. I have my own fashion company that has sent products to bloggers, and the shout outs really help." (57)

> "I think it is decent to refer to the company you got your products from, as a way to thank them for their support." (24)

These extracts illustrate a tendency to consider marketing gains from a company perspective, which can in part be explained by the entrepreneurial spirit of blogging itself. However, this tendency also reveals that some bloggers align themselves very close to the companies, once again implicitly pointing towards the symbiotic nature of the relationship between fashion bloggers and the fashion industry. In her essay on the meaningfulness of fashion blogging, Minh-Ha Pham made a similar connection: while there may not be any formal agreement for bloggers to write in a positive manner about a brand they collaborate with, bloggers understand there is an "unspoken social contract informally conditioning blogger's access to the fashion industry" (2011:11-12). The more a company invests in a collaboration (i.e. inviting bloggers to events specifically for them vs. just sending out a free product), the more pressure bloggers feel to reciprocate in a way that is useful to the company. It is implicitly understood that failure to comply to the wishes of the company will not foster a good relationship with said company.

3.2.1.2 *Advertising as a double-edged sword*

Blog marketing is frequently discussed as a double-edged sword, something both to be desired and feared. When asked whether engaging in blog marketing affects the credibility of bloggers, 17 constructed marketing as a benevolent and almost selfless act: "No. In fact it is a positive move to introduce emerging designers, which don't have a lot of advertising budget so instead, they do PR (engaging bloggers)". On one hand, displaying adverts or participating in collaborations were presented as actions that could increase credibility. 11 commented

"[…] I think some people see it as an achievement or a credit of some kind."

The argument here seemed to be that advertisements on a blog page made the blog seem more professional, as further illustrated by 20:

"I have been receiving sample product for years, and have no intention of stopping. This validates a lot of blogs for the reputable information sources that they are. Designers and brands send just as much product to the highly visible magazines - that's how the industry works, so why not send just as much energy towards the highly visible blogs that are just as effective, as well?"

This argument is underpinned by a notion that monetary exchange validates blogging as a profession, but perhaps also suggests a possibility that the credibility of established brands rubs off on the bloggers who collaborate with these brands. Naturally, the inverse could also be applicable – positioning yourself with a brand that has been tainted could also reflect badly on the blogger.

On the other hand, the notion of advertising as something evil and undesirable that taints the integrity of the blogger is present in much of the data, but the negative impact is presented as dependent on the form and amount of advertisement. On the practice of accepting free product samples, 38 comments:

"[…] there is definitely a limit to the amount that is natural on a blog without compromising your content. Is the blog about YOU or Products?"

Excessive commercialism or sponsored posts that are not in line with the content of the blog were constructed as inherently bad. Bloggers exhibited a belief that readers will quickly recognize if the blogger does not truly stand behind an endorsement and explained that this works as a social check – bloggers fear losing readers if the blog is seen as disingenuous or the blogger is believed to try to dupe the reader, as illustrated by 45:

"[…] Readers put a level of trust into your writing. If they find out you're endorsing something your paid to endorse, they can begin to distrust you."

When examining blogger adherence to journalistically ethical practices, Cenite, Detenber, Koh and Lim (2009) found the same thing: accountability manifests itself through vigorous feedback from readers.

The problematic nature of marketing was navigated through the concepts of transparency and moderation. When asked whether bloggers should disclose company collaborations to readers, respondents echoed the importance of being transparent with readers, as illustrated by 41:

> "Yeah absolutely. Not only because the FTC ruled that you HAVE to disclose free products, etc. but I think it's just a good code of ethics to have. For myself personally, I completely value my readers & I don't ever want them to think I'm lying to them. I'd rather be completely transparent about it."

Some cited rules set out by the American FTC and were aware of the legal requirement to disclose products received for free, but most, like 51, focused on a responsibility towards readers:

> "I always say: 'Look what I was sent' or 'thank you X for sending me'. It would be duplicitous to pretend you purchased something yourself if you hadn't. I believe transparency within the blogger community is what keeps readers believing in 'their' bloggers, otherwise they end up feeling cheated."

This is also in line with the findings of Cenite et al. regarding bloggers' ethical beliefs and practices. Cenite et al. (2009) explored blogger adherence to four ethical principles of journalism: truth telling, accountability, minimizing harm and attribution. They found that bloggers profess to value aforementioned principles, but place most importance on attribution and minimizing harm (in this case transparently telling readers about collaborations) and consider accountability least important. Attribution or transparency was construed as a way to retain the trust of readers. Bloggers explained that breaking of this trust could occur if readers were not informed about when a brand was trying to influence them, if the blogger was not expressing their own views but those of a company, or if the blogger was trying to present a false sense of affluence:

> "There needs to be some level of trust involved, that the reviews and opinions expressed are genuine and not being sold to the highest bidder. Otherwise, I want no part of it." (35)

> "[…] if you are honest with your readers about what you receive for free, they usually don't mind you writing about it. If you don't include these collaborations, you are pretending you have all kinds of stuff and new collection and that is just not fair; nor to the brand and nor to your readers." (52)

"[…] They're suggesting to their readers that they afforded everything they're wearing, and that's just dishonest." (54)

Moderation was discussed as another solution for retaining the trust of readers while engaging in blog marketing. 52 comments:

"I don't think the credibility of bloggers is affected by featuring brands on their blogs but only on one condition: if you deal with this on a smart, honest and a self-respecting way. If you just copy press files, write review about every free sample possible and accept every offer, your credibility will be definitely affected. People won't take you serious anymore and won't respect your own opinion anymore, as they only read copied opinions. If you write about such things in your own words with your own view, your public won't mind."

Bloggers did not comment on how much was too much, but writing about every single thing received from a company was construed as bad:

"It depends how the bloggers do it. If they sell out and do it all the time and write about everything, then it really ruins the bloggers reputation. If you keep it simple, by making sure the products are ones you like and wear and have adverts relevant to your blog, in a minimal way, it's ok." (68)

Present in the data was a tension between wanting to stay true and engaging to readers and engaging in commercialism – talking about fashion or style without being the least bit commercial can be a difficult endeavor as the fashion industry itself encourages customers to consume. Personal tastes and content cohesive with the general content of the blog were dictated as selection criteria for what types of marketing to engage in. Responses seemed underpinned by a belief that these criteria would themselves sufficiently moderate the commercialism of the blog.

3.2.1.3   *Times are changing*

'Times are changing' captures an idea of fashion blogs as the new normal, with bloggers positioning themselves in competition with fashion magazines. This theme heralds a shift in the traditional power structures within fashion, indicating that bloggers want to take up the space once reserved for fashion editors, both physically, in the front rows at fashion shows, and metaphorically, in terms of readership and taste-making. Along with this new role within the fashion industry comes a desire to influence and to be considered authoritative voices within fashion.

Some respondents compared either themselves or other fashion blogs to fashion magazines, commenting that they considered fashion blogs could even go beyond what magazines do. They also questioned the pedestal fashion reporting had been placed on, commenting on magazines' ability to be critical:

> "Blogs have the capacity to question, to be critical, more so than magazines. […] However, I don't think fashion magazines are that thorough or critical either. It's the same trend report shit over and over again, or "how to get ready for your beach body", god, very thorough /roll eyes" (28)

> "Some fashion blogs are critical--more critical than magazines because unlike magazines their advertising or income isn't affected by a designer or brand. Magazines also don't write many opinion articles; their critiques come more from what pieces they show in editorials. It's silly to say blogs aren't critical compared to magazines because magazines aren't critical. Newspapers can be critical but magazines are not. Also bloggers aren't journalists and aren't newspapers--they don't feature the assorted points of view of an entire staff-- blogs feature one point of view. We can't and shouldn't be expected to write multiple opinions. That doesn't mean a blog won't edit, fact check, or write well." (32)

These extracts demonstrate ambition; a desire for blogs to be taken seriously as platforms for discussing fashion and as an interest in reading more critical, thoughtful writing about fashion.

At the same time, the respondents engage in exactly the type of surface-level criticism of journalists' fashion reporting that bloggers themselves have been accused of. This criticism contains notes of defensiveness, indicating that some fashion bloggers are quite aware of the critique directed towards fashion blogs and that it is a bit of a sore subject. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that respondents did not praise fashion blogs across the board, but rather confessed an awareness that the majority of fashion blogs in existence were not critical voices within fashion. While comparisons to magazines were drawn, bloggers did not claim to be exactly the same as a magazine with a staff and several viewpoints – instead they declared that they represented a new, more personable approach to writing about fashion.

15, an American long-time blogger with a moderately large readership writes:

"I think it is different. I think there are some blogs that are completely credible in their reporting, and there are other blogs that are not going for that at all".

The reasoning in the extracts above relies on a construction of fashion bloggers as disruptors who are shaking up traditional power structures within fashion. Fashion magazines, both implicitly and explicitly, are presented as old, uninteresting and in the pockets of advertisers. The construct positions bloggers as agents of change who question the authority of fashion editors, declaring fashion a democracy. Talking about the lack of criticism in fashion blogs, 40, an American, relatively new blogger, asks:

"who says there are "Experts" in fashion?! It's preposterous. Anyone and everyone has the freedom to express how they feel about fashion, not just those individuals who work at a magazine."

This extract demonstrates a desire to tear down the wall separating magazine writers and regular consumers of fashion and pushes back against the idea that professionals within the fashion industry should get to dictate style. The construct is underpinned by tension between the idea of taste as objective and personal (all opinions are equal) and the desire of professional bloggers to be considered fashion influencers.

Under closer scrutiny, democracy in fashion does not seem to hold up against the ambition to become the new authoritative voices. This is further illustrated by another competitive setting: respondents commented that the term 'fashion blog' encompasses too large a spectrum of bloggers, providing separate categories for fashion blogs, fashion news blogs, shopping blogs and personal style blogs. Some bloggers began to unconsciously align themselves with magazines and position themselves against "less serious" bloggers, as can be seen in comments like 33's:

"[…] I have been blogging a very long time, so I've seen this new emerging type of blogger that accepts everything thrown at them and I think they stand out like a sore thumb. I would hope quality bloggers would have some integrity about themselves and only accept freebies that are adding value to their blog."

This extract shows that there is an element of competition that underpins fashion blogging, as those who seek to become professionals within the field are realizing

that there is only room for so many. The notion that the writers with the most integrity will prevail appears repeatedly in the data.

The construction of fashion bloggers as disruptors presents blogging as an inevitable development that will surpass traditional print media, signifying a permanent change in the status quo. In reference to fashion editors and critique of fashion blogs, 35, an experienced American blogger with moderate readership asserts:

> "[…] these people need to understand just how incredibly influential blogs are becoming. Like it or not, that is 100% the way the future us headed, and you can either embrace it or chose to be left behind".

This extract evokes someone who is ready to be considered a professional, and to be treated as such.

Magazines do it, too

When examining the data, "Magazines do it, too" became a common excuse for why bloggers engage in blog marketing. The practices of fashion magazines were singled out as points of comparison:

> "Fashion editors get gifts and choose what to put in print as a result of that. It's the same thing on a different scale." (43)

> "For magazines and print publications, it is implied that the media outlet received the products and samples either on loan, or courtesy." (20)

These extracts illustrate a construct of experienced unfairness – many bloggers felt they were being criticized unfairly in relation to fashion magazines. Respondents commented that editors of fashion magazines are sent free products just as frequently as bloggers, and that the received products in fact form the selection of what is put in print. Fashion blogs have been criticized for a lack of critical reporting, which is presented as being due to an unwillingness to write unfavorable things about companies that approach them. Bloggers commented that fashion magazines are just as unlikely to bite the hand that feeds them, but that they are not placed under the same type of scrutiny as bloggers because product placement in magazines is more covert.

The issue for these respondents was not blog marketing itself, nor fashion magazines per se, but rather the portrayal of bloggers as sell-outs. This sub-theme further illustrates how some fashion bloggers consider themselves to be in competition with magazines and want to be viewed as credible sources alongside fashion magazines.

3.2.2   Keeping it real

In contrast to *business is business*, *keeping it real* is an overarching theme that captures blogger thoughts around fashion blogs as above all, personal. Fashion blogging was constructed as a space of one's own and a hobby, something done out of curiosity about style or fashion that provided a creative outlet. This emphasis on the personal rather than the professional underpins all of the themes and subthemes found within this theme and serves as the central organizing concept.

I identified two themes and two subthemes within this overarching theme: 1) *Personal preference* captures an implicit rule for blog marketing that emphasizes personal taste as the dominant factor in selecting collaborations. 2) *I blog for me* captures the notion of blogging as a personal endeavor, something done for self-expression rather than for professional or aspirational reasons; within this, the sub-theme *blogs as complimentary to magazines* captures an admiration for fashion magazines and a tendency to view blogs as supplemental fashion sources, while *blogging for community* captures an implicit model of social validation through blogging, describing how the personal aspects of blogging are underpinned by a desire to be part of something bigger, to share ideas and common interests with others and to gain the approval of others.

3.2.2.1   Personal preference

In a majority of the responses analyzed, fashion bloggers emphasized that their blogs were a representation of their person and a reflection of their personal style. *Personal preference* emerged as the most common selection criteria for what brands or products these bloggers chose to feature on their blogs. Within this theme emerged a construct of blog marketing as unethical, unless done out of a genuine interest in the brands featured. Respondents commonly justified blog marketing as

acceptable if the products featured were ones the blogger personally liked and would be willing to purchase themselves:

> "I will only work with companies/brands that I genuinely like and would promote regardless of the partnership." (15)

> "I have strict rules about how I go about this. From day one I have only promoted the products and brands that I love and would wear myself. I refuse to have any guest posts on my blog and I don't publish anything I wouldn't wear myself. I always keep everything true to my own style and my own voice. "(68)

Characteristic for this theme was an apprehensive approach to blog marketing, though the motivations for the apprehension varied. Some bloggers saw advertising as inherently evil and in itself a sign that a blogger was being disingenuous. Commenting on the practice of accepting free samples, 66 maintained the practice "shouldn't taint them but it always does because it's not something they bought on their own. It doesn't have their stamp of approval really." Prevalent in the data was a fear that bloggers who write about products received for free would feel pressured to write positive things and that they would not reveal their true opinion. Most respondents explained they themselves would only write about products they genuinely believed in, but they did not extend trust in other bloggers to do the same.

Most bloggers did not display aversion towards blog marketing or advertising in itself – many had in fact engaged in some form of collaboration with brands or intimated a willingness to engage in collaboration if given the chance. The dividing point became what was given in exchange for aforementioned collaboration. Participating in a collaboration purely in exchange for pay was described as wrong. Bloggers situated themselves as writers with a set of ethical rules, interested mainly in writing about fashion and personal style – not in the profits to be made. As such, any free products featured had to represent the personal aesthetics and buying habits of the blogger, as described by 51:

> "I have a specific aesthetic I don't stray from, not for any free sample in the world. I couldn't live with promoting something I don't like."

This attitude was underpinned by two thoughts: that the blogger's own ethics prevented them from participating in marketing that was dishonest, and the notion

that readers will recognize if the blogger was disingenuous about their interest in a brand they chose to feature.

Of course, a blogger might not even come across certain brands or products unless contacted by them, which makes the requirement of recommendations based on personal preference a bit muddy to navigate. Some bloggers conveyed an awareness of this, explaining that they are more critical of brands that approach them for the purposes of marketing than they are of brands they have found on their own, as illustrated by 32:

> "I choose things I would or do buy. I also try to feature brands and products that I find on my own; I'm more critical when a company approaches me to decide if they're a good fit."

Personal preference is framed as the main deciding factor in what the blogger writes about, while outside interference causes apprehension.

Bloggers displayed a desire to strike a balance between the commercial and personal aspects of fashion blogging, best explained by 37:

> "I think it is only ethical and appropriate if the review is honest and/or the items sent are something that the blogger would normally choose to wear whether they are free or not."

37 constructs marketing strictly in exchange for pay as ethically wrong, indicating that honesty is key. Bloggers were concerned not just with what is ethically acceptable, but also cited a moral obligation to be honest to their readers, acknowledging that advertising that was not in line with the blogger's taste would negatively affect their credibility:

> "I only accept products that I like or get to personally pick out. & the same goes for advertisers. I was once approached by a porn website to put their links in my blog's sidebar for a few hundred dollars. Obviously that money would have been great, but I had to say no thanks. I mean, I write a fashion/personal style blog. the point is to be wearing clothes, not to be naked." (41)

> "I'm starting to see so many bloggers who are letting their style be influenced by the free items they are sent, and I think this in turn negatively affects our credibility." (37)

3.2.2.2 I blog for me

I blog for me captures the way fashion bloggers describe blogging as a personal endeavor, something undertaken as a personal outlet. The vast majority of respondents cited personal reasons for taking up the practice of blogging. Bloggers listed very similar motivations behind blogging, including a love for fashion, the need for a creative outlet or a place to keep record of outfits, as well as a desire to act as a source of inspiration. Some bloggers also explained they started blogging out of boredom, in need of a hobby. When bloggers were asked to state what they thought the main purpose of their blogs were, their responses echoed the motivations previously mentioned. Respondents again cited personal reasons such as documenting their personal style and views on fashion, or simply showcasing their interests. One blogger stated her blog was "essentially a very public personal diary", while another commented it was an outlet that pushed her to "create something good". This situates bloggings as a means of self-expression rather than professionalization. The bloggers who identified as "blogging for me" emphasized that their opinions were their own and they were not trying to be an authoritative voice in fashion. 26 states:

> "Well, I write what I want and of course it makes me happy when I realize some people actually agree with me and share my opinions. I don't blog to make others happy, I blog because it makes me happy. If people like what I say and follow my blog, well, thank you very much! If people don't like what I blog, I'm sorry but I'm not gonna change to have more followers."

Bloggers emphasized the personal nature of their writing, indicating that while they enjoyed positive exchanges they did not require validation from their readers or from the fashion industry. This in nicely articulated in 28's comment:

> "[…] I of course find it important that people know that my blog is MY blog, and I write what I want to write there and dress the way I want to dress. I'm not a big fan of "friendly criticism" unless I ask for it."

When discussing whether the opinion of blog readers matters, 24 stated:

> "Readers may think of me, my style and opinions as they'd like. As long as they keep their opinions decent, I don't mind".

Blogs inhabit an interesting area between personal diaries and official publications – they provide a platform for discussing personal and even private

topics, but are still available for everyone to read and comment. The data shows that bloggers do crave exchange of thought with readers, but that bloggers are mostly looking to share ideas with like-minded individuals, not to influence large crowds. Sharing personal aesthetics with the internet may seem like a way of seeking attention, but it appears that to many bloggers finding a creative outlet was a stronger motivating factor for blog writing than that of gaining readers, likes or sponsorship. For these fashion bloggers, the blog served as an extension of the self.

Blogs as complimentary to magazines (Two sides of the same coin)

In contrast to the earlier subtheme *magazines do it, too*, fashion blogging was constructed as a way of consuming fashion that is complimentary to magazines. Fashion blogs were celebrated for providing a positive approach to fashion and style, with an emphasis on blogger likes rather than dislikes. Fashion blogging was described as a hobby with an emphasis on the personal – the purpose was to document personal style and share thoughts with like-minded individuals, not to spark serious discussion or critique:

> "[…] Fashion bloggers are NOT (not being the operative word) fashion magazines. So that statement doesn't count. Having your own fashion blog is having your own little place to express your likes and dislikes as well as your style. It's not essential that you critique everything like fashion magazines do. Fair enough if you want to do that, but it's the bloggers personal preference. Not everyone has to run designers down or speak badly of celebs. We tend to post about the things we love and like rather than the things we dislike. Positivity portrays better than negativity." (68)

Fashion magazines were discussed with reverence, as serious journalistic publications and sources of inspiration. Being beholden is discussed as the key ingredient separating magazines from blogs: as journalists, writers for fashion magazines are bound by rules regarding objectivity, but also by convention within the fashion industry, such as necessary attendance of fashion shows and subsequent critique of designs. Magazines are also beholden to advertisers, meaning that they may be careful of biting the hand that feeds. 53 describes blogs as purely personal, allowing more room for subjective commentary and honesty:

> "[…] I think fashion blogs are a separate platform than fashion magazines. With blogging, it's completely subjective and personal. It's your blog, so you can form your own opinions. If people don't agree with them, they don't have to read it."

27 described blogs as more approachable than magazines:

> "I think that bloggers offer a different opinion than industry experts. We are real people so our opinions reflect real buyers and our reporting will reflect our preferences. It is unlikely that I will post about a brand that I don't like. I'd rather promote the brands that I do."

While bloggers held that blogs could speak more frankly than magazines, most did not discuss a need for blogs to be critical. The complimentary nature of blogs was to be found precisely in the lack of criticism, blogs were instead viewed as a way of democratizing fashion and making it available to everyman:

> "[…] Blogs have started out as a journal of ones own life, and my fashion blog is about sharing my personal taste in art, style and clothing, not saying what the future trends are going to be and what everyone should wear." (11)

> "[…] Many fashion magazines focus on mainstream fashion that not everyone can relate to. Fashion magazines feature 6 foot tall, size 2 models, whose bodies and lifestyles represent a tiny fracture of the population. Who can really relate to that? I think blogging reaches an audience that fashion magazines never could. Blogging is fashion BY real people, FOR real people." (53)

Blogs were described as platforms for writing about fashion and style as it appears in real life rather than on the catwalk. This paints a picture of fashion bloggers as fans of fashion that can provide commentary and inspiration to others in spheres fashion magazines often ignore. Bloggers seemed happy to write only about things they like, preferring to leave criticism to seasoned professionals such as fashion reporters. As most magazines appear monthly, blogs also provided a source for fashion in the interim period between publication.

Blogging for community

Within the sphere of blogging as an extension of the self, some bloggers asserted that blogging served as much as a personal creative outlet as a social activity. The driving force behind blogging for many of the survey respondents was a need to connect with others who shared their interests, as explained by 35:

> "I started blogging out of loneliness, to be honest. I felt a bit out of touch with the people where I was living at the time, and I wanted a way to connect with others who shared my interests in clothing, movies, second hand shopping, and history."

The common hobby of fashion and the medium of blogging provided an opportunity for bloggers to become part of a community they might not have found through other means.

While bloggers emphasized the personal aspect of blogging, they exhibited an awareness of the public nature of the medium:

> "[…] While I blog for myself, it is really important that my readers enjoy my posts too. Blogging is all about community and communities respect and value each other's opinion." (38)

Some clearly sought social validation through blogging, and the previous excerpt by 38 shows that the personal aspects of blogging are underpinned by a desire to be part of something bigger, to share ideas and common interests with others and to gain the approval of others. Bloggers revealed fear of letting their readers down and placed importance on the opinion of their readers, as illustrated by 40's comment:

> "It is extremely important to me that my readers value my opinion, because at the end of the day my readers are the individuals who make my blog a vibrant, fun, and amazing place."

 Connection, rather than professional ambition, was a key motivation of blogging for these writers, best described by 41: "

> Although ultimately I started blogging for myself, I've kept it going by the overwhelming response I've gotten from readers."

The seeking of connection also translated as pressure to be honest with readers and to find topics that could be of potential interest to readers – in other words external factors started to influence the writing. These bloggers expressed concern with how participation in blog marketing would affect their readership, ultimately holding themselves accountable to readers rather than the fashion industry.

4   Discussion

The themes found in the survey responses suggest that bloggers are not a homogeneous group. Several schools of thought are present among fashion bloggers but the defining difference seemed to be blog ambition. Results also suggest that bloggers are far from unwitting participants in regard to marketing: they are quite aware of what can be gained or lost through engaging in commercialism.

Common for most respondents was that they applied some sort of filter when deciding on what types of blog marketing to participate in – supporting the conclusion that bloggers do follow some sort of ethical guidelines as regards to marketing.

4.1   Fashion bloggers as credible sources

The supposition regarding blog research has been that personal bloggers welcome all company collaborations with open arms, but there is little proof to support this way of thought. The research of Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright suggests the majority of people who write personal blogs do so for themselves (2004a: 6). The results of this thesis both support and negate the findings of Herring et al.: survey participants could be divided into bloggers with either personal or professional motivations for blogging. Common for both groups is that bloggers have more interest in sharing their views and opinions than in helping companies reach potential customers, though the reason for this varied. No respondents gave receiving free things as the main reason for engaging in fashion blogging, but some commented this was an added perk or considered it a form of compensation for the work put into writing. Most of the fashion bloggers who responded to the survey considered their readers to be important to them, and wanted readers to value their opinion. Bloggers also valued the social aspects of blogging, and kept going thanks to encouragement from their readers. Many of the bloggers who responded explained that they wanted to cultivate close relationships with their readers, which meant earning their trust. As a result, the bloggers made conscious efforts to be selective about the type of blog marketing practices they engaged in, and to give

honest critiques about products they received.

While maintaining a good relationship with their readers was important to most of the bloggers to responded, their views regarding credibility in relation to traditional print media differed. Two competing views emerged: bloggers who were driven by a professional ambition considered themselves to be in competition with fashion magazines and questioned the hegemony and supposed impartiality of magazine editors, while hobbyist bloggers viewed magazines as sources of inspiration and considered their content supplemental to fashion magazines.

Common for both views were that bloggers did not feel journalistic integrity applied to them, and in fact thought it unfair to compare fashion blogs to fashion magazines. Bloggers emphasized personal writing as the defining characteristic of fashion blogs, which in turn meant they considered the rules for writing should be less strict. Fashion bloggers stated they were happy to follow the rules set out by the FTC, but resented the fact that blogger integrity was subject to closer scrutiny than the fashion press.

Most fashion bloggers were selective about the type of marketing they engaged in, but this seemed due to a strong personal moral code rather than a conscious desire to be considered impartial professionals. Many of the bloggers who responded were indeed guided by the same type of ethical rules as journalists, but these rules were largely unspoken and conformity varied. Respondents indicated that the inherently personal nature of most fashion blogs means that blog writing is subjective by nature, and that it is the responsibility of the readers to form their own opinion about the themes and brands discussed in fashion blogs rather than blindly trust the views expressed by bloggers.

Overall, blogger attitudes toward blog marketing could be described as positive, but wary. The level of wariness tended to depend of the level of professionalization of the blogger, the more ambitious motivation bloggers declared for blogging, the more willing they seemed to engage in varying forms of blog marketing. The larger the degree of professionalization of the blogger, the more awareness they exhibited regarding blog marketing practices and the pitfalls involved with engaging in marketing. Most bloggers displayed a clear understanding of why companies approach them and what companies stood to gain

(or loose) from such interactions. Bloggers communicated a thoughtfulness and selectiveness in the brands they engaged with, but some also conveyed very pragmatic views, explaining that leveraging the power of their blog for the benefit of companies was simply a way on making ends meet. Marketing and advertising were, as a whole, not discussed as inherently evil not something to aspire to, but as a transaction that should be mutually beneficial.

Roughly half of the bloggers that responded to the survey indicated a clear awareness that engaging in blog marketing might affect their credibility, and the majority of all respondents thought it was important to strike a balance between featuring products and being honest with their readers. However, when asked whether they thought engaging in blog marketing affects the credibility of bloggers in general, almost half of the respondents still answered no. These responses seemed largely motivated by personal experience with blog marketing and blogging integrity, not by critical thinking about fashion blogging as a whole. Bloggers were aware that indiscriminately featuring anything that comes their way might negatively impact their credibility, but most did not believe participation in blog marketing would have a negative effect in itself. Practically all of the respondents had engaged in some form of blog marketing, the most common form of which was accepting free samples. The willingness of fashion bloggers to accept free things and engage in marketing is problematic, as relationships with brands are likely to influence blogger opinions, at the very least unconsciously. While the vast majority of the bloggers who responded gave personal aesthetics (rather than monetary incentive) as the main reason when deciding what brands to feature on their blogs, the fact that all of the bloggers considered it completely acceptable to feature products and engage in product placement raises red flags. On the other hand, bloggers are subject to a type of social checking that is not applied to fashion magazines: bloggers believed readers 'police' fashion blogs and will call out bloggers that "sell-out".

4.2   The unspoken rules of blog marketing

The fashion bloggers who responded to the survey were largely on the same line when it came to what type of blog marketing they considered acceptable. It is

evident that certain unspoken rules exist among fashion bloggers when it comes to marketing, and these rules seem based on a common set of ethics rather than legislation. The results were conclusive with those of Cenite, Detenber, Koh and Lim (2009), who examined the ethical beliefs and practices of bloggers and found that bloggers valued truth-telling and attribution more than accountability. While many of the American bloggers who responded mentioned that they have to adhere to FTC guidelines, they maintained that their personal views on blog marketing already corresponded with the recently introduced legislation.

Fashion bloggers reacted particularly negatively to featuring products in exchange for money, indicating that bloggers strongly value honesty, and feel it is their responsibility to provide readers with an honest opinion. While many of the fashion bloggers who responded to the survey admitted they had come across fellow bloggers whose writing was largely motivated by monetary profit or who were willing to feature any brand that approached them, this type of behavior was generally frowned upon.

The majority of the fashion bloggers who participated in the survey also though it was important that any brands or products featured were in line with the theme of the blog. For instance, most fashion bloggers would not think it acceptable to feature brands that were not clothing brands or to market cooking appliances or electrical gadgets on a fashion blog. Many of the survey participants also reacted strongly against featuring every single product received, insisting that it was important to be selective when choosing what brands to work with. Bloggers made choices about what kind of marketing they engaged in based on personal aesthetics or benefit to readers, emphasizing that they thought the only way they could maintain their credibility was if they featured brands they personally believed in, or that they thought their readers might be interested in.

More than two thirds of the fashion bloggers who participated in the survey valued transparency, and thought it was important to disclose collaborations to readers. Bloggers did not think it was acceptable to hide a relationship with a brand from their readers if the blogger achieved monetary gain through said collaboration. Bloggers also considered it important that any writing involving a brand or product was free of influence from the brand, maintaining that blog entries should be written in their own voice, not in that of the collaborating company's promotional

department. Bloggers expressed dislike for blog writers who copied press releases or posted glowing, uninformative reviews of products.

4.3   Implications for business

When analyzing the results of the survey, I found very little to substantiate claims that bloggers engage in blog writing simply for the sake of making a profit. Bloggers could be grouped into two categories: those who blogged out of professional ambition and aspired to become either professional fashion bloggers or professionals within the field of fashion; and those who viewed blogging was a personal and rewarding hobby (though some of the bloggers who started writing as a hobby had later become professionalized as they realized the potential of their blog). Very few of the respondents were completely averse to participating in some type of blog marketing. The survey results show that most fashion bloggers do not actively set out to become professional bloggers, but that companies and brands seem to be driving blogger professionalization more than the bloggers themselves.

The professionalization of fashion blogs is largely the result of savvy marketers that have recognized the potential of blogs as WOMM vehicles, but bloggers are certainly keen to earn rewards in return for the work they put into their blogs. The vast majority of the bloggers were very receptive when it came to accepting free product samples or product giveaways for readers, but made it clear that any attempts to influence their writing would not be tolerated. The survey results indicate that suggesting bloggers write about products in exchange for payment is one of the least successful marketing strategies, especially if the company tries to tell the blogger what to write. Most of the bloggers who responded explained that they react negatively to being told what to write, and also dislike the assumption that they will write about anything that is sent to them.

While sending out free samples is an inexpensive marketing strategy, this type of marketing is fruitless if the brand targets bloggers whose writing is not related to the brand or product in need of promotion. Brands that want to approach fashion bloggers are likely to have a higher rate of success if they spend some time getting acquainted with the themes the bloggers write about, making sure they only approach bloggers who align with their brand. More personalized communication

with bloggers will not only help reach the target market better, it will also increase the likelihood of bloggers agreeing to participate in marketing.

Respondents commented that some of the brands that had approached them had tried to pressure bloggers into writing about samples they had received, insisting that accepting free samples meant willingness to feature said sample. All of the bloggers who responded reacted negatively to pressure and refused to engage with marketers who used such methods. Fashion bloggers are quite selective when making choices about who to work with, and respondents strongly emphasized their right to choose. Brands that attached demands to free samples were immediately rebuffed. The bloggers who responded made it clear they wanted to be free to make up their own minds about products they received, and would not be coerced into writing about products they could not relate to or did not enjoy.

Though it may be frustrating or even daunting for marketers to leave the content of blog promotion into the hands of the bloggers themselves, it seems the only way to get fashion bloggers to engage with companies at all. Because WOMM is at its most effective when expressed in the words of the blogger, brands will see more success if they are able to refrain from pushing their marketing content on bloggers – allowing bloggers to produce content in their own voice. There seems to be very little risk for businesses in maintaining fashion bloggers' freedom of expression in relation to marketing communication, as most bloggers explained they were very unlikely to write negative reviews. If bloggers do not like a product, they are more likely to not mention it at all than to criticize it publicly.

The bloggers who were driven by a desire to make blogging a profession exhibited an ability to view marketing from the perspective of the brand, understanding that businesses are run for profit and want to see some form of return of investment. These types of bloggers displayed an interest in fostering relationships with businesses and designers beyond the acceptance of free samples. Professionally motivated fashion bloggers desire to be active participants in the blog marketing process, and are likely to be more understanding of businesses motivations than bloggers with more personal motivations for blogging.

Not many of the fashion bloggers that responded to the survey had participated in sponsored events, but the majority of the bloggers displayed positive

attitudes to such events. They voiced appreciation at the thought of being treated as more than cheap advertisers, and seemed genuinely interested in building relationships within the fashion industry. This receptive attitude serves as an indication that marketers who want to utilize bloggers as spokespersons are most likely to succeed if they can offer bloggers terms that are mutually beneficial. Marketers who truly want to engage bloggers and their readers will need to work at building reciprocal, equal relationships with them. Brands that are able to build open and mutually respectful relationships with bloggers are more likely to achieve brand loyalty, resulting in a higher return of investment.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has explored how knowledgeable fashion bloggers are regarding blog marketing, and whether they consider it important to maintain credibility in the eyes of their readers. Fashion bloggers are such a diverse group that it is difficult to draw any general conclusions regarding their attitudes to advertising, as opinions vary based on which individual you ask. Because the sampling for the survey this thesis is based on was relatively small, I do not claim to provide a comprehensive picture of the attitudes of all fashion bloggers. The findings presented in the thesis do, however, give us a general idea of what drives fashion bloggers to participate in blog marketing, and they also serve to deepen our understanding of not only what bloggers think about blog marketing, but also the reasoning behind said thoughts and attitudes.

The present analysis recognizes two core characteristics of fashion blogger attitudes to marketing in the form of overarching themes, *business is business* and *keeping it real*. The former manifested in a view of blogging as a profession and marketing as a quid pro quo. The latter focused on fashion blogs as personal, creative outlets and showed more interest in self-expression than marketing.

The more ambitious fashion bloggers saw blogging as an endeavor that could and should be regarded as a profession, even if they themselves did not aspire to do it professionally. These bloggers displayed favorable attitudes to using fashion blogs as marketing vehicles and also displayed an ability to view marketing from the perspective of businesses, understanding the needs of the businesses and designers that approached them. They indicated an interest in fostering relationships with businesses and saw collaboration as a means to further their own professional goals within the fashion industry, some intimating a willingness to engage in advertising for financial gain. Bloggers became defensive when discussing criticism aimed at fashion blogs by editors of fashion magazines, in turn criticizing magazines of hypocrisy and questioning the assumed impartiality and critical reporting ability of fashion magazines compared to blogs.

By contrast, fashion bloggers who emphasized the personal aspect of blogging viewed the practice not as a profession, but as a hobby, a creative outlet

and a form of social interaction. These bloggers were more apprehensive regarding blog marketing, and emphasized the importance of attribution and personal taste above all else in regard to marketing. The less professionally inclined bloggers were very unlikely to agree to advertising products or brands purely in exchange for pay – for them there had to be a personal connection to the product they chose to feature. This group displayed admiration toward fashion magazines but did not voice any journalistic aspiration, emphasizing the role of fashion blogs as supplements to magazines and 'fun' spaces for sharing inspiration with like-minded individuals rather than destinations for critical reporting. For these bloggers, the communal aspects of blogging outweighed the commercial. Marketing was discussed in relation to readers, as more weight was placed on fostering good relationships with readers than on building relationships with brands or businesses.

The results of this thesis paint a picture of fashion bloggers as active participants of the fashion industry that are becoming increasingly aware of their blogs' potential as marketing vehicles. Both professional and hobbyist bloggers were open to advertising, but placed varying degrees of importance on transparency. Almost all maintained that brands and products featured should be in line with the overall style of the blog and insisted that they would only participate in marketing if it was done on their terms. They wanted to be able to articulate the message themselves and have the final say in what was published on their blogs.

Reliable sources are the foundation of academic writing, but finding these sources quickly manifested as the main challenge to the writing of this thesis, as academia still has not paid much attention to blogs. At the time I began writing my thesis, most academic research had centered on linguistics (examining the language used in blogs) or on the ways in which companies have made use of blogs as marketing vehicles. Little attention had been given to fashion blogs, and even less so to the attitudes of blog writers. While this meant that the topic for this thesis was well chosen from a research perspective, it also made the research itself a bit of a challenge. Fashion blogs and their writers have been given plenty of media attention, but not in academic publications. It quickly became clear that the literary review portion of the thesis would have to rely on somewhat unorthodox sources in the form of newspapers, fashion magazines and fashion-themed websites, as these were the only publications that had written about fashion blogging. As blogs and social

media gain more traction, future academic research will hopefully have a wider array of sources to rely on.

A common shortcoming of self-administered surveys includes a low response rate and lack of verification of participants' identities. While attempts to combat these problems were made through opting for a survey that was administered electronically and sent to the e-mail addresses of carefully selected bloggers, the response rate stayed at roughly ten per cent. Reaching persons through mass e-mail is difficult, since emails may be disregarded or mechanically filtered out as spam. Furthermore, the most popular bloggers receive hundreds of e-mails per day, which means that the incentive to open a survey – let alone respond to it – is very low. Bloggers were given ample time to respond to the survey, but they were not sent reminder e-mails due to a fear that bloggers might disregard multiple e-mails about a survey due to annoyance. E-mails that contained a reminder about the survey and the response deadline might have been worth the risk, as they could have increased the response rate, resulting in a larger and more reliable sampling.

The bloggers who did respond to the survey mainly did so out of personal interest in the topic of the thesis, and many of the respondents asked to be sent the finished thesis so they too could partake in the results. The responses received suggest that fashion bloggers do have an interest in furthering research into the field of blogging, but the low response rate suggests that a survey is probably not the best way to reach bloggers, particularly not professional blog writers. Blogger interest in the topic could perhaps better be harnessed through interviews conducted either personally or via the Internet, as a more personal approach might appeal to the vanity of possible respondents and help legitimize the research in their eyes.

The low response rate could perhaps also have been combatted through less strict selection criteria, which would have meant surveys could have been sent to a larger group of people. A snowballing technique might also be worth exploring, though this would most likely mean giving up control of selection altogether.
The survey was a mostly successful foray into measuring blogger attitudes, but that does not mean there was no room for improvement. Some of the questions could have been more detailed, and the focus of the survey itself could have been narrowed further. Parts of the survey were overly repetitive, which meant that

responses to consecutive questions were at times too similar. Bloggers were asked both why they started blogging and what they thought the purpose of their blog was, which many participants interpreted as one and the same question. Questions like these would have garnered more informative answers if they had been worded differently, explained further, or had been multiple-choice rather than open-ended.

If different questions had been chosen, or the amount of demographic warm-up questions had been reduced, the study could have included questions that would have supported measuring the strength of different attitudes. The survey could have been extended to measure attitude knowledge or elaboration (as described by Visser, Bizer and Krosnick 2004:4) by asking bloggers to rate the amount of knowledge they considered themselves to have about an attitude object or by asking how much they had thought about the object previously. Had the survey platform kept track of how long it took a respondent to answer individual questions, the survey could also have measured the accessibility of attitudes.

While the results presented in this thesis give us a general idea of the attitudes fashion bloggers hold regarding blog marketing, quantitative research is still needed to substantiate the findings. Quantitative studies would lend themselves to measuring attributes of attitude strength such as intensity, extremity and importance, which are traditionally measured through Likert scales and self-reporting.

The majority of the bloggers who responded to the survey this thesis is based on were not professional bloggers, and as such it is difficult to gauge the attitudes of writers who have made a longtime profession out of fashion blogging. It might be useful to expand future research in the form qualitative interviews with recognized, professional fashion bloggers, in order to see whether there is a shift in attitudes when blogging is the sole source of income.

Only one of the fashion bloggers who responded to the survey considered herself to be in direct competition with fashion magazines, but signs of rivalry could be detected from other respondents as well. Many of the fashion bloggers were angered by the amount of transparency that is required of them compared to what is required of fashion magazines, perhaps rightly so. The changing media landscape has opened up new forms of marketing, which invariably also evokes discussion

about consumer protection and legislation. Many of the fashion bloggers who responded to the survey seemed to think the legislation pushed by the FTC in the United States was unnecessary, and it does seem unfair to require complete transparency from fashion bloggers while letting fashion journalists off the hook. While the results of this thesis point towards a rivalry between magazine editors and writers who aimed to make a profession out of fashion blogging, some fashion bloggers, such as Elin Kling and Leandra Medine, have themselves become editors of fashion magazines or online platforms for fashion – exchanging the more personal nature of blog writing for a more attached editorial style (Borelli-Persson 2017, McCall 2017). The relationship between fashion blogs and magazines is constantly developing, and this could be worth exploring in more detail.

Fashion blogging is no longer as recent a phenomenon as it was at the conception of this thesis. I began writing my thesis in 2012, during a time when social media and fashion blogs were still relatively new phenomena. At the time, not much academic research had been conducted in relation to fashion blogs – this has changed somewhat over the past seven years. The issue with writing about an emerging practice – particularly one related to digital content – is that development is so rapid that the topic itself may become irrelevant by the time research is done. Since the emergence of blogs, microblogging in the form of Instagram and videoblogging on YouTube has come to dominate the way in which younger consumers spend their time. Fashion blogs and the written word in general may not be the only efficient way of reaching younger demographics these days, but I would like to think that the general conclusions this thesis draws about how blogger attitudes to marketing and how to generate successful eWOM may be applicable to collaboration with video bloggers as well. Further research could be expanded to involve prominent fashion influencers on Instagram or on YouTube, to see whether a change in medium also means a change in attitudes towards marketing.

Swedish summary

Trovärdighet i blogosfären – Modebloggares attityder till bloggmarknadsföring

Inledning

Tillkomsten av Internet och sociala media har lett till ett allt mer splittrat medielandskap, vilket i sin tur gjort det svårare för företag att nå kunder genom traditionella marknadsföringsmetoder. Nya kanaler för kommunikation kräver nya strategier inom marknadskommunikation – något företag börjat ta fasta på. Modeindustrin har varit särskilt snabb med att inse bloggens värde som marknadsföringskanal. Modeföretag har börjat tillämpa metoden att sända gratis exemplar av produkter till modebloggar och har även bjudit in bloggare till modevisningar och återförsäljares lokaler i hopp om att bli positivt omnämnda i bloggtexter. Målet bakom denna form av produktplacering i modebloggar har varit att skapa en djungeltelegrafeffekt och på detta sätt nå fler potentiella kunder än genom traditionella marknadsföringsmetoder.

Allteftersom modebloggar givits tillgång till evenemang som tidigare var begränsade till modejournalister har traditionella media börjat anklaga modebloggar för ytligt, kommersiellt och okritiskt skrivande. Företag och tidningsskribenter tar modebloggares villighet att delta i bloggmarknadsföring för givet, men det finns ingen egentlig undersökning som stöder antagandet. Denna pro gradu -avhandling forskar hur modebloggare förhåller sig till marknadsföring på deras personliga bloggar, med fokus på engelskspråkiga modebloggar. Syftet med avhandlingen är att studera till vilken grad modebloggare är medvetna om bloggmarkandsföring och marknadsföringens inverkan på bloggarens trovärdighet, men även att bedöma modebloggares villighet att delta i bloggmarkandsföring.

Syfte och ämnesmotivering

Bloggrelaterad akademisk forskning har främst fokuserat på marknadsföring i sociala medier, med fokus på för- och nackdelar med att utnyttja bloggar som

marknadsföringskanaler (Kozinets 1999, Dahlén 2005, Zhu och Tan 2007, Singh, Veron-Jackson och Cullinane 2008, Serazio 2010). Varken forskare eller marknadsförare har ämnat särskilt mycket uppmärksamhet till bloggares synpunkter gällande marknadsföring på personliga bloggar. I samband med att allt fler modeskribenter börjat livnära sig genom bloggar är det viktigt att undersöka exakt hur bloggare förhåller sig till bloggmarknadsföring. Eftersom modebloggares trovärdighet och opartiskhet ifrågasatts upprepade gånger kunde forskning inom ämnet belysa både bloggläsare, journalister och marknadsförare gällande huruvida bloggare är värda mer tillit än de hittills givits.

Är modebloggare bara ovissa, godtrogna eller rentav giriga verktyg för marknadsförare att utnyttja, eller är de aktiva, medvetna deltagare i marknadsföringsprocessen? Svaret på denna fråga kunde hjälpa marknadsförare att överväga hur de ska närma sig bloggare, men även informera bloggkritiker och läsare om hur trovärdiga modebloggare är då det gäller moderapportering.

Målet med studien är att få en preliminär översikt över bloggskribenters attityder till bloggmarknadsföring med hjälp av en online-enkät som skickats ut till modebloggskribenter som skriver på engelska. Min forskningsfråga är följande:

1: Hur förhåller sig modebloggare till marknadsföring på personliga bloggar?

För att svara på denna fråga ställde jag fyra underställda frågor som denna avhandling ämnar svara:

1.1: Är det viktigt för modebloggare att betraktas som trovärdiga informationskällor?

1.2: Är modebloggare medvetna om hur bloggmarkandsföring påverkar deras trovärdighet?

1.3: Följer modebloggare någon form av outtalade regler gällande bloggmarknadsföring (dvs. finns det bloggmarkandsföringsmetoder bloggare vägrar utnyttja)?

1.4: Är det möjligt för företag att styra modebloggare eller föreslå vad bloggare ska skriva?

Presentation av metod och material

Studien genomfördes med hjälp av en online-enkät (se bilaga 1) som konstruerades på basen av studiens forskningsfrågor och skickades ut till modebloggare via e-post. Jag valde att använda en enkät eftersom jag ansåg det vara den bästa metoden att nå bloggare som befann sig i ett antal olika länder och tidszoner. Det fanns en risk att modebloggare skulle stå i försvarstillstånd då de ställs frågor gällande bloggmarknadsföring, därav framstod enkäten även som en lösning som kunde lugna deltagare och öka sannolikheten för ärliga svar.

Enkäten genomgick en runda av pilottestning innan datainsamlingen påbörjades. Det slutliga frågeformuläret innehöll några flervalsfrågor och ett flertal öppna frågor, totalt 20 stycken frågor. Mottagarna valdes ut på basen av bloggens storlek – mitt fokus låg på bloggar med största mängden läsare, eftersom skribenterna bakom dessa bloggar kunde antas ha längre erfarenhet av bloggmarkandsföring. Jag letade efter bloggar på bloggspårningssidor som Bloglovin och på välkända bloggportaler som Independent Fashion Bloggers, Freshnet och Nowmanifest.

Enkäten skickades slutligen till 350 modebloggare av vilka 33 svarade på enkäten. Mängden ansågs tillräcklig för att kunna utläsa någon form av mönster i materialet. Svaren på enkäten analyserades kvalitativt, genom tematisk analys. Frågorna analyserades först en fråga åt gången. Alla svar lästes igenom flera gånger för att identifiera vanligt förekommande tankar och motiv. Efter detta kodades svaren med nyckelord, varefter svaren grupperades i olika kategorier enligt nyckelorden i en Excel-fil. Liknande koder grupperades ihop för att forma ett antal teman. Analysen kompletterades med individuella bloggares kommentarer som mer detaljerat belyste identifierade teman.

Redogörelse för undersökningen

I min analys identifierade jag två överliggande teman: *bloggen är business* och *ärlighet är bäst*. Gemensamt för båda teman var en generellt positiv attityd gentemot bloggmarknadsföring, skillnaden låg i bloggarnas villighet att delta i marknadsföring.

Bloggen är business uttrycker en benägenhet att betrakta bloggskrivandet som ett yrke och marknadsföring som en transaktion. Bloggare hävdade att de bloggade av personligt intresse för modebranschen, men förhöll sig positivt till bloggmarknadsföring. Karakteristiskt för detta huvudtemat var en benägenhet att betrakta marknadsföring inte bara ur modebloggarens egna perspektiv, utan även ifrån företagets (dvs. den marknadsförande partens) perspektiv. Bloggare var måna om företagens behov och uttryckte förståelse för varför företag närmar sig modebloggare, men visade även att de var medvetna om bloggens styrka som marknadsföringskanal. För dessa bloggare stammade intresset för bloggmarkandsföring från en önskan att förvandla bloggen till huvudsysselsättning. Marknadsföring beskrevs i neutral ton som ett sätt att livnära sig eller åtminstone som rättvis kompensation för arbetet bloggen kräver. Bloggare försvarade deltagelse i marknadsföring genom att jämföra modebloggare med modetidningar, som även de finansieras genom annonser. Modebloggare betraktade modetidningar som konkurrenter och hävdade att modejournalister blir skickade produktprover gratis och skriver om de produkter de mottar, precis som bloggare.

Bloggare beskrev bloggmarknadsföring som ett dubbeleggat svärd: marknadsföring och annonser på bloggen legitimerar bloggen som något mer än en hobby, men bloggaren riskerar att mista sin status som trovärdig källa ifall läsarna anser att bloggaren "är till salu".

Ärlighet är bäst fångar vissa bloggskribenters tendens att betrakta bloggskrivandet från ett personligt perspektiv snarare än ett yrkesperspektiv. Bloggen beskrevs som ett utlopp för skribentens kreativitet eller tjänade en social funktion. Få bloggare var entydigt kritiska gentemot bloggmarkandsföring, men uttryckte försiktighet och även oerfarenhet gällande marknadsföring. Karakteristiskt för detta tema var en benägenhet att betrakta bloggen som framförallt personlig – bloggare betonade att de bloggade för sin egen skull, inte för att tjäna pengar eller etablera sig inom modevärlden. Dessa bloggare betraktade modetidningar som inspirationskälla och såg bloggen som ett komplement till modetidningar. Bloggen beskrevs som en form av gemenskap, ett sätt att komma i kontakt med likasinnade personer som delar bloggarens intresse för mode.

Resultat

Modebloggare och trovärdighet

Analysresultaten stöder Herring, Scheidt, Bonus och Wrights (2004 a: 6) forskningsresultat, där Herring et al. fann att majoriteten av de människor som skriver personliga bloggar gör det för sin egen skull. Även de bloggare som uppgav en önskan att bli professionella bloggare motiverade önskemålet genom personligt intresse för mode, inte genom intresse för marknadsföring eller gratis gåvor. Majoriteten betonade läsarnas värde och ansåg det viktigt att läsare uppskattar bloggarens åsikt. Detta i sin tur antydde att bloggare är väldigt selektiva gällande vilken form av marknadsföring de tar del i, men snarare pga. personlig etisk syn än ett medvetet mål att betraktas som opartiska proffs. De bloggare som svarade enkäten verkade följa regler som på många sätt påminde om journalistiska regler, men reglerna var långt outtalade och konformiteten till reglerna varierade från person till person. Uppskattningsvis hälften av deltagarna uttryckte att de var medvetna om att bloggmarkandsföring påverkar deras trovärdighet, men alla tyckte det var viktigt att nå en balans mellan det kommersiella och det personliga.

Resultaten avslöjade två olika läger i relation till traditionella media som modetidningar: en grupp som ifrågasatte modejournalisters auktoritet som modekritiker och ansåg sig ligga i konkurrens med modetidningar; samt en grupp som beundrade modetidningar och såg upp till dessa.

Outtalade regler inom bloggmarkandsföring

Deltagarna betonade i regel att de inte tyckte det var acceptabelt att delta i marknadsföring endast mot finansiell kompensation – bloggare underströk att det måste finnas någon form av personlig anknytning till företaget eller produkten som marknadsförs. Bloggare förklarade att varumärken och produkter måste ligga i linje med bloggens övriga innehåll, annars framstår bloggaren som oäkta. Det betonades även att man inte får göra reklam för alla produkter man skickas av företag, utan att man måste vara noggrann och gallra. Personlig smak och tycke (eller sådant man trodde läsaren kunde vara intresserade av) styrde modebloggarnas val av samarbetspartner. Bloggare framhävde ärlighet och vikten av att berätta sin

uppriktiga åsikt och skriva med egen röst. Deltagarna underströk att blogginnehållet inte fick dikteras av en utomstående part.

Majoriteten av bloggarna nämnde även attribution som en grundläggande faktor till att behålla sin trovärdighet och det ansågs viktigt att bloggaren berättar om företagssamarbete eller gratis mottagna produkter till sina läsare. En bidragande faktor till att attribution betraktades som betydelsefullt är att USA:s lagstiftning vid enkätens utskickande nyligen hade uppdaterats med krav om att bloggare klart informerar konsumenter om kommersiellt samarbete på sina bloggar.

Innebörd för affärslivet

Resultaten indikerar att modebloggare inte börjar blogga för att göra vinst. Vare sig bloggen var en hobby eller ett mer professionellt engagemang var bloggskrivandet för alla deltagare motiverat av personligt intresse för mode. Väldigt få deltagare höll sig fullständigt negativt till bloggmarknadsföring, vilket indikerar att skribenter gärna tar emot någon form av kompensation för sitt arbete även om de betraktar bloggen som en hobby. Samtidigt verkar företag driva professionaliseringen av modebloggar genom att finansiera hobbyn. En del bloggare beskrev att de startade bloggen i icke-professionellt syfte, men insåg modebloggens potential som yrke då företag tog kontakt.

Bloggares kommentarer gällande marknadsföring tyder på att företag med största sannolikhet kan vänta sig framgång inom bloggmarkandsföring ifall varumärket eller produkten man vill marknadsföra stämmer överens med bloggens övriga innehåll och faller i bloggarens tycke. Modebloggare var inte mottagliga till försök att direkt diktera eller påverka bloggens innehåll, utan ansåg det viktigt att kommersiellt samarbete skedde på deras villkor. Bloggares selektivitet i att välja ut produkter tyder på att det är bättre att närma sig bloggskribenter med mer engagerande samarbetsförslag än gratis produktexemplar. Samtidigt är risken för företag rätt låg – resultaten indikerade att bloggare osannolikt kommer med stark kritik gentemot företag. Deltagarna lade emfas på det positiva och förklarade att de helst inte skriver något alls ifall de inte gillar produkten/ varumärket.

Resultat

Sedan enkäten denna avhandling bygger på har modebloggen som medium forskats mer utförligt, men relativt lite forskning har fokuserat på modebloggares attityder till marknadsföring. Denna studies resultat kan inte nödvändigtvis generaliseras eftersom antalet informanter var liten, men studien ger en preliminär överblick i vad modebloggare tänker om bloggmarkandsföring och kan därmed fungera som grund för framtida studier.

Många deltagare uttryckte frustration över kritiken som riktats gentemot modebloggar och bloggares brist på transparens, särskilt i förhållande till modetidningar. Denna kritik har antagligen bidragit till konkurrensen denna studie fann mellan modebloggare och traditionella media. Samtidigt har det varit intressant att följa med utvecklingen av professionella modebloggare under de senaste åren, eftersom många modebloggare numera grundat egna modetidningar eller modeplattformer. Prominenta modebloggare har bytt ut exposition och personligt skrivande mot ett mer redaktionellt närmandesätt, vilket indikerar att förhållandet mellan bloggen och modetidningen inte är så entydig. Detta förhållande fortsätter sannolikt att skifta i framtiden och kunde vara av ytterligare intresse för forskning.

Majoriteten av studiedeltagarna var inte professionella modebloggare, vilket betyder att resultaten kan ha påverkats av att deltagarna inte hade långtidserfarenhet av bloggmarkandsföring. Vidare forskning inom ämnet kunde fokusera på professionella modebloggare i form av kvalitativa intervjuer, eftersom det kunde vara av betydelse att se ifall det uppstår ett skifte i attityder gentemot bloggmarknadsföring då bloggen är skribentens huvudsakliga inkomstkälla. Bloggen är ej heller längre det enda sättet att nå konsumenter. Sedan denna avhandling påbörjades har Instagram och YouTube vuxit i popularitet – det kunde vara nyttigt att forska huruvida attityder till marknadsföring är annorlunda på olika influeringskanaler.

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Appendix 1: The questionnaire

Fashion blogs and credibility: Blogger attitudes to advertising

About the writer of this questionnaire

My name is Marita Koivisto, and I am a Master's student at the English Department in Åbo Akademi University, in Finland. I am currently writing my Master's thesis on blogger attitudes to advertising, and the brunt of my thesis will be based on the results of this questionnaire.

About this questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire is to map out blogger attitudes to advertising. Through the questions asked I hope to find out how fashion and style bloggers react to companies approaching them, and what motivates bloggers to write – or not write – about certain products or brands. I also want to find out what stance bloggers take when it comes to transparency, and whether they consider it important to divulge information about collaborations they participate in to their readers.

Answering this questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes, and the participants will remain completely anonymous. If you have any questions regarding the questionnaire, please contact me at: marita.koivisto@gmail.com

Compulsory questions are marked by asterisks.

Questionnaire

1. **In which country do you live? ***

[   ]

2. **What is your age? ***

○ under 18
○ 18 to 25 years old
○ 26 to 30 years old
○ 31 to 35 years old
○ 36 years or older

3. **How long have you been blogging? ***

○ Less than 6 months

○ more than 6 months but less than 1 year

○ more than 1 year but less than 2 years

○ more than 2 years but less than 3 years

○ 3 years or longer

4. **How many readers do you have (at this date)? ***

○ less than 500

○ more than 500 but less than 1000

○ more than 1000 but less than 5000

○ more than 5000 but less than 10 000

○ 10 000 or more

5. **Why did you start blogging? ***

[   ]

6. **What do you think is the main purpose of your blog? ***

7. **Is it important to you that your readers value your opinion? Could you explain why/why not? ***

8. **Fashion critics and editors such as Cathy Horyn and Franca Sozzani have accused fashion blogs of lacking reporting and not being critical enough, especially in comparison to fashion magazines. Do you agree with this assessment? Could you explain why/why not? ***

9. **Do you consider yourself to be competing with fashion magazines? Could you explain why/why not? ***

10. Some companies send out free samples of products to bloggers in the hopes of a blog mention. What do you think about this practice? *

11. How do you feel about company-organized events specifically for bloggers (i.e. fashion shows and collection previews, shop openings etc)? *

12. Have you ever been approached by a company, shop or brand representatives? *

○ Yes

○ No (skip to question #19)

13. (If yes) What do you think was the purpose behind this?

14. What type of collaborations have companies suggested to you? (select all options that apply)

☐ Free samples (in hopes of a mention in the blog)
☐ Product giveaways to readers
☐ Sponsorship (in terms of an advert on the blog)
☐ Events (fashion shows, shop openings, collection previews)
☐ Other, please specify

15. What kind of collaborations have you participated in? (select all options that apply)

☐ None

☐ Accepted free samples

☐ Accepted product giveaways to readers

☐ Sponsorship

☐ Events (fashion shows, shop openings, collection previews)

☐ Other, please specify

> [   ]

16. Do you see featuring products on your blog as a form of:

☐ Recommendation

☐ Review

☐ Offering inspiration

☐ Advertising

☐ Other, please specify

> [   ]

17. How do you choose what products, companies or brands you feature on your blog?

> [   ]

18. In your blog, do you specify what products you have received for free (as opposed to ones you have purchased yourself)?

○ Yes

○ No

19. Do you think bloggers should disclose the company collaborations they participate in to their readers? Could you explain why/why not? *

20. Do you think featuring advertisements or writing about free samples affects the credibility of bloggers? In what way? *

Comments

21. If you have any additional comments, please feel free to provide them below: