Fashionable Personae: Self-identity and Enactments of Fashion Narratives in Fashion Blogs

Abstract
This article scrutinizes the practices and strategies mobilized by fashion bloggers in the construction of a subject position which is embedded in established fashion narratives and based on references to the self and self-representation. Fashion blogs are discussed as cultural artifacts which revolve around reflexive identity politics in contention with embodied techniques of self-fashioning and dress practices. Fashion bloggers produce fashion media partly based on the enactment of their own self-identity in relation to dress practices and on their incorporation of knowledge of fashion media and pop culture imagery. Because
of this oscillation between individual dress practices and collective fashion narratives, fashion blogs raise issues about the way in which fashion media relate to self-identity. Based on empirical research with qualitative methods using a grounded theory approach, this article discusses a construct of subjectivity labeled as “fashionable persona.” The “fashionable persona” is understood as a situated, narrative, and performative character developed by bloggers specifically for their blogs that is anchored simultaneously in the blogger’s self-identity and in the enactment of collective cultural narratives. Three dimensions in the enactment and construction of “fashionable personae” are discussed: the discursive construction, the bodily enactment, and the self-actualization of fashion bloggers as economic subjects.

KEYWORDS: fashion blogs, identity, digital media, persona, fashion media, fashion narratives

Introduction and Literature Review

Over the past decade, we have witnessed the meteoric rise of fashion and street style bloggers, ranging from unknown authors of new forms of Web-based, fashion-related publications to notable intermediary agents in the social order of the fashion system. Their ascent can be traced from many directions and their attainment of status evidenced by their presence at runway shows during fashion weeks in Milan, Paris, London, and New York. Since approximately 2010, the discussion around the legitimacy of fashion bloggers has grown into a theme of journalistic reporting particularly during fashion week, indicating not only the feeling of threat felt by established fashion media professionals but also the increasing influence of bloggers. Following Entwistle and Rocamora, who argue that fashion week’s “main function is to produce, reproduce and legitimate the field of fashion and the positions of those players within it” [Entwistle and Rocamora 2006: 736], the invitation of some particularly successful fashion and street style bloggers to the catwalk shows in New York, Milan, London, or Paris can be read as an indication of their gradual recognition in the (previously) exclusive field of high fashion (Rocamora 2011: 408).

While the fashion bloggers’ position in the hierarchy of fashion media and, more widely, within the structure of the fashion industry, is still evolving, the phenomenon increasingly attracts the attention of fashion scholars (Berry 2010; Chittenden 2010; Marwick 2013b; Pham 2011, 2013; Rocamora 2009a, 2011, 2012; Rocamora and Bartlett 2009; Rosser 2010; Titton 2010; Watzlawik 2010). As an expert in the sociological analysis of fashion media (Rocamora 2009b), Agnès Rocamora leads the way in making sense of the phenomenon. In examining the construction of identity and femininity through clothes on personal...
style blogs in the context of Foucauldian technologies of the self, she discusses how the bloggers’ self-portraits can be regarded as affirmations of traditional female stereotypes but also as sites of empowerment and self- assertion (Rocamora 2009a, 2011). In another paper (Rocamora 2012), Rocamora discusses the specificity of fashion blogs as products of a hypertextual media structure in relation to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome (Rocamora 2012: 96) and explains the continuities and reciprocal influence between blogs and other fashion media as a process of “remediation” (Rocamora 2012: 101). The link between identity construction and fashion in fashion blogs is also addressed in a paper by Chittenden (2010) who examines the way in which teenage girls form their identity through their practices of fashion blogging and how this helps them gain self-esteem and a positive self-image which then translate into alternative sources of cultural and social capital. Thus fashion blogs are particularly interesting in terms of the sociology of fashion because they can be located at the intersection between fashion as a system of representations enacted in the media and everyday dress practices (Rocamora 2011: 411).

Fashion bloggers document how dress is converted into fashion by taking pictures of themselves wearing particular outfits, by writing about their wardrobe choices, and by publishing these stories on their blogs (Rocamora 2011: 410). Because of this oscillation between individual dress practices and collective fashion imagery, fashion blogs raise issues about the way in which the reception and production of fashion media relate to self-identity conceived of as “the self reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens 1991: 53). In other words, fashion bloggers produce fashion media which are at least partly based on the enactment of their own self-identity in relation to dress practices but also rooted in the negotiation and incorporation of their knowledge of fashion media imagery.

The article discusses sociological identity theories (Giddens 1991; Ricoeur 1992) in relation to fashion theories and develops a theoretical framework based on empirical research. The continuities between blogs and other types of fashion media in the use of self-reflexive narratives are analyzed and I scrutinize the diversification of these narratives set forth by bloggers in texts and pictures. In this article, I examine the practices and strategies mobilized by fashion bloggers in the construction of a “fashionable persona,” a subject position that is, on the one hand, embedded in established fashion narratives and, on the other, based on references to the self and self-representation.
(fashion and street style blogs) on fashion and its media. My PhD thesis is based on empirical research with qualitative methods (text and picture analysis) using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) supported by the data analysis software “Atlas.ti.” The grounded theory method is characterized by the fact that data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, resulting in a circular research process in which the data collection is informed by the emerging analysis and vice versa (Charmaz 2006: 20; Strauss 1987: 16). Initially arising categories are elaborated and refined by gathering more data which focus on specific conceptual aspects in a strategy called “theoretical sampling” (Charmaz 2006: 96). This strategy is a fundamental step in the construction of new conceptual and theoretical models, which is one of the explicit goals of a research design based on grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2006: 10).

The analysis presented in this article draws primarily on blog entries consisting of texts and pictures from two personal style blogs and is further illustrated by referring to articles from online and print media which are centered on fashion and personal style blogs. In particular my analysis here is grounded in the main in texts and images from The Coveted and Style Bubble albeit the findings are abstracted from the individual case studies and discussed at a conceptual and theoretical level, according to the logic of inductive theorizing in grounded theory method (Charmaz 2006: 168; Strauss 1987: 12).

When I started to collect data for my research in 2010, one of the criteria in my data sampling strategy was to choose fashion blogs with a “history” that was as far-reaching and continuous as possible in order to reconstruct their development through time. Among the plethora of fashion and personal style blogs, I decided to analyze texts and pictures from Style Bubble by British blogger Susanna Lau and from The Coveted by American blogger Jennine Jacobs. Their blogs can be classified as “personal fashion blogs” or “personal style blogs” because, unlike street style blogs or specialized fashion blogs, the two women chronicle their individual fashion choices with texts and pictures (Rocamora 2011: 409). Both Lau and Jacobs can be considered pioneers of fashion blogging (Lau started her blog in 2006,1 Jacobs in 20072) and both have reached a certain degree of notoriety (measured by media coverage in the fashion press, in general-interest newspapers and magazines) due to their activity as fashion bloggers. However, it is Susanna Lau who has become a veritable fashion celebrity and, as Pham notes, “not simply a global style icon but a model of exemplary neoliberal subjectivity” (Pham 2013: 4). Even though fashion blogs already existed when these women launched their blogs, both Jacobs and Lau contributed to the increasing standardization of fashion blogs in terms of the style of writing and photography with their growing notoriety and success, as well as in the overall aesthetic of their blogs. Particularly Jacobs can be considered a “mover and shaker” of the fashion blogosphere: in 2007, she also
founded the online platform “Independent Fashion Bloggers,” a website which first aimed to represent the interests of fashion bloggers and then increasingly grew into a compendium of advice and tips for fashion bloggers ranging from legal questions to business strategies, from technical instructions to graphic-design templates (Rocamora 2009a: 38). With her activity as a fashion blogger and network facilitator, Jacobs actively participated in negotiating the rules and values that characterized the culture of the fashion blogosphere in which Lau thrived as an exceptionally successful player.

**Fashion Blogs: From Collective Visions to Personal Matters?**

It is crucial to understand about fashion blogs that they raise questions about selfhood mediated by fashion and dress, about the constitution and configuration of identity, and the public performance of self in relation to social media (Rocamora 2009a: 25). Fashion blogs revolve around the representation of fashion in the lifeworld of their authors and potential readers. Fashion trends, style advice, and dress practices are displayed as personal affairs and subsumed into the psychosocial geography of bloggers. Fashion blogs foreground the narration of the personal and can therefore be categorized as the latest permutation of the format of personal narratives in fashion media (Rocamora and Bartlett 2009: 108). In a media culture which is increasingly self-reflexive and self-referential, fashion bloggers claim their own spaces of representation and in their articles they narrate their own stories and experiences and take pictures of themselves in their self-styled outfits. In their narrative style, fashion blog posts are reminiscent of the opinion column, a journalistic genre in which the author’s musings form the fulcrum of the text. However, it is important to stress that “personal” in this context is not meant as a category equivalent to biographical authenticity but as a mediated and objectified form of self-reference, which in the case of bloggers is complemented with a visual self-presentation (Rocamora 2009a: 24). For that reason, an examination of the self displayed, constructed, and mediated on fashion blogs needs to be framed by theories that explain the constituency of identity and personhood.

As media formats, fashion blogs evoke different journalistic genres: with their pictures taken in living rooms, bedrooms, backyards, or on balconies (as in the case of Susanna Lau), they echo a distinct aesthetic of female domesticity and intimacy familiar to lifestyle magazines and women’s magazines. The colloquial language is dotted with words of fashion vernacular and characterized by a confidential tone reminiscent of diaries (Rocamora 2011: 411). However, due to their small-scale production (in comparison to print fashion media) and context of their publication, fashion blogs represent cultural artifacts located...
Conclusion

Fashion blogs have eroded the distinction between the idealized fashion subject constructed by the fashion industry and the consumer of fashion and reader of fashion media. While fashion bloggers display their bodies, their tastes, their feelings, and everyday experiences in pictures and texts they are enacting a “fashionable persona,” a situated, narrative, and performative subject position constructed in contention with the dissimulating possibilities of fashion. In this sense, fashion blogs are ultimately a transfigured prolongation of fashion’s production of fictions, personae, and simulations through its media.

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Notes


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