

“Regular People with a Passion for Fashion”: Authenticity, Community, and Other Social Media Myths

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Abstract

Fashion blogging represents a distinct culture and practice of social media production that involves the creation and public distribution of style-related images, information, and personal commentary. Mainstream media coverage of fashion blogs situates them within a distinct moment of digital cultural production defined by destabilized, decentralized, and democratized flows of media. However, these narratives are both limited and limiting in that they fail to provide a productive framework to understand the nuanced cultures and political economies of fashion blogging. This research draws upon a textual analysis of the Independent Fashion Bloggers online community to show how fashion blogging is constructed through an interrelated series of “identity myths”: 1). The authenticity myth; 2). The autonomy myth; and 3). The equality myth. These myths, I argue, effectively conceal those social media practices that tend to appropriate—rather than resist—capitalist infrastructures and traditional media industry logics.

Keywords

fashion blogs; social media; cultural production; labor; identity

Background

Against the backdrop of digitally reconfigured circuits of media production and consumption, fashion blogging has emerged as a distinct culture and practice of online content creation that involves (mostly female) diarists producing and distributing fashion and style-related images, information, and personal commentary. While the nature and scope of fashion blogs varies extensively—ranging from high fashion runway recaps to “street style” photography to niche blogs on plus-size looks, vintage finds, or DIY design—they have been collectively hailed for “democratiz[ing] style” and “allowing regular Janes like you and me to become part of the international fashion conversation” (Givhan, 2007, para. 3; Brown, 2011; para. 3). Such democratization narratives fit rather cozily into the discourses of interactivity and blurred producer/consumer boundaries that have come to define the contemporary era of participatory culture (e.g., Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006).

The ascendance of fashion bloggers is also reshaping other sites of cultural production, particularly the women’s magazine and fashion industries. This signals what Myers (2012) recently described as an “intervention...into traditional media production hierarchies” (p. 1024). Indeed, fashion bloggers are now granted access to Fashion Week and other haute couture events, encroaching on territory once exclusively reserved for magazine editors and A-list celebrities. In addition, some members of this new generation of fashion cognoscenti have developed working relationships with high-profile advertisers and designers. That mainstream media have pitted women’s magazine editors against bloggers has only amplified the rhetorical tension between traditional media producers and the recent flood of digitally enabled “amateur” content creators (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004)

Taken together, these overlapping discourses position fashion blogging within a distinct moment of digital cultural production defined by democratized communication and destabilized power hierarchies. I argue, however, that such narratives are both limited and limiting in that they fail to provide a productive framework to understand the nuanced cultures and political economies of fashion blogging. For instance, what is meant by the term “fashion blogger”? What are the affordances and limitations of self-identification with the practice? How do fashion bloggers define themselves and

articulate their identities to their audiences? How does the technological structure of blogging communities configure certain practices and norms? And, finally, how can the answers to such questions help us understand emergent forms of social media—particularly within a gendered, commercialized context?

Method

This paper aims to critically examine how fashion bloggers construct and manage their identities as (gendered, racialized, and classed) individuals, as content producers, and as members of an imagined community. To understand how bloggers articulate these various identity indexes (individual, professional, collective), I conducted a textual analysis of more than 200 posts and one thousand comments included on the Independent Fashion Bloggers network (IFB) over a seven-year period (2006-2012). As the largest community of fashion bloggers, the IFB offers a unique opportunity to interrogate bloggers' reflexive practices and discourses.

Summary of Findings

What emerged from the data is a fragmented, multidimensional, and at times contradictory definition of “fashion bloggers” that is held together through an interrelated series of “identity myths.” These myths, which I will explain and complicate below, include:

1. The authenticity myth
2. The autonomy myth
3. The equality myth

Fashion bloggers tend to emphasize their “authenticity,” which is constructed in part through the narrative that they are “just like us.” Their authority, then, comes from the domain of everyday, lived experience rather than from professional training or expertise. As IFB member *britishbeautyblogger* noted, “most bloggers aren't professional journalists, [they're] just regular people with a passion for fashion.” However, the “authenticity myth” was challenged by references to the economic and social capital necessary for one to keep a regularly updated blog; blogger investments include internet access, software and editing programs, camera equipment, and fashion/accessories, among others. Further, some bloggers **do** have professional experience and/or connections from careers in the journalism, social media, or advertising industries. By pushing back against the construction of bloggers as “just like us,” I show how fashion blogger culture tends to be both classed and gendered.

Closely related to the authenticity myth is what I call the “autonomy myth,” or the idea that blogging is a form of self-expression that exists apart from societal and commercial pressures. Narratives on the IFB site, for instance, indicated blogging was a way for individuals to discover their true selves. For instance, *Vahni* from *Grit and Glamour* wrote in an IFB post, “Blogging is not about numbers and comments and popularity. It's about creative expression...It was—and is—for you.” Importantly, though, this celebration of creative self-expression was tempered by extensive discussions about how to attract external recognition in the form of audiences and advertisers. Individualist expression is thus positioned as a means to an end (commercial success) rather than an end itself. The self, in this case, becomes an entrepreneurial subject that uses creativity for self-branding purposes (Gill, 2008; Hearn, 2008).

The “equality myth” is bound up with larger narratives about the power of the internet to democratize communication and foster collaboration. Fashion blogs are often described as public forums that allow participants equal access to the mediated public sphere. According to one IFB commenter, the “blogging community [is] one of the most democratic spaces on the Internet!” This rhetoric of democratization tends to obscure the hierarchical nature of the fashion blogging community. Bloggers are frequently put into categories with labels like “professionals,” “top-tier,” and “mid-range

bloggers,” each of which is based on traditional markers of success (i.e., income and audience metrics). What is more, very few fashion bloggers are able to turn their hobby into a full-time career. Most face what Chia (2012) described as a “disparity between the promise of prosumption and bloggers’ actual experiences and opportunities for communication and its monetization” (p. 428).

Conclusions

The category of social media participants known as “fashion bloggers” is perhaps an unreliable one; it is held together through a series of mythical constructs that seem to romanticize emergent forms of labor in the digital economy. Yet behind these promises of pleasure—even resistance—lie acts appropriated from the capitalist system. Far from being authentic, autonomous, and community-oriented, the emergent organization of fashion blogging is increasingly hierarchical, market-driven, quantifiable, and self-promotional.

Findings from this study can help us push back against recent calls to rethink traditional understandings of media industries in light of new economies and technologies of media (i.e. Hartley, 2009). A more productive endeavor, I argue, is to turn attention to ways in which emergent sites of consumer participation are configured to promise flexibility and individualism while retaining (problematic) Postfordist industrial structures and relations. This includes precarity, inequity, and a continuous negotiation between creativity and constraint.

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