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Engholm, Ida; Hansen-Hansen, Erik

Published in:
Digital Creativity

DOI:
[10.1080/14626268.2013.814148](https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.814148)

Publication date:
2013

Document Version:
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Engholm, I., & Hansen-Hansen, E. (2013). The fashion blog as genre: Between user- driven bricolage design and the reproduction of established fashion system. *Digital Creativity, published online* (2013), 1-15. Article 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.814148>

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Digital Creativity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ndcr20>

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Ida Engholm^a & Erik Hansen-Hansen^a

^a The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation;

Published online: 09 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Ida Engholm & Erik Hansen-Hansen , Digital Creativity (2013): The fashion blog as genre—between user-driven bricolage design and the reproduction of established fashion system, Digital Creativity, DOI: 10.1080/14626268.2013.814148

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2013.814148>

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The fashion blog as genre—between user-driven bricolage design and the reproduction of established fashion system

Ida Engholm and Erik Hansen-Hansen

The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation

ie@dcdr.dk; eh@kadm.dk

Abstract

Fashion as a phenomenon cannot be understood independently of the visual images and designed presentations that convey the content and forms of fashion. With the breakthrough of the digital media in the 2000s we were introduced to new ways of communicating and staging fashion where the blog in particular has established a new media culture for the distribution and exchange of potential fashion-based self-presentation forms and resulted in new design strategies. In this article, the fashion blog is presented as a specific genre that is characterised by remediating existing genre forms and combining them into new formats, where amateur bricolage approaches are combined with the reproduction of familiar features from the established fashion media. The article presents four types of fashion blogs, each representing a specific design strategy for presenting and interacting with fashion content. In closing, it is argued that the fashion blog as a phenomenon, on the one hand, has placed the ordinary fashion consumer centre stage as a producer of fashion content while also, on the other hand, helping to consolidate established hierarchical and communicative structures in the fashion system.

Keywords: fashion blogging, web 2, remediation, fashion representation, documentary real-life street photo, self-presentation

1 The fashion blog as genre

The fashion blog as a phenomenon cannot be understood independently of the social software, which became widespread in the mid-2000s. This software defined a new paradigm, the so-called web 2.0, for producing and interacting with online content, and in a wider sense it involved a shift from passive media spectatorship towards more complex models of interaction. So far, fashion blogs have not in themselves been the object of much research interest. However, the rapid growth of the field is evident in the many discussions of the influence and status of blogs in fashion magazines and webzines. In the following, the fashion blog is presented as a specific genre that has taken shape with the spread of blogging tools in the early 2000s, where various types of blogs emerged.¹

The earliest fashion blogs appeared in the mid-2000s and were defined by private fashion bloggers who used the new blogging tools to share fashion content. The bloggers' main focus was on presenting their own fashion preferences and on referring and linking to the websites and pictures of established fashion magazines and

fashion firms. With inspiration from the first private blogs, established fashion magazines began, almost simultaneously, to incorporate blog elements on their websites. The established magazines, however, used professional fashion writers as bloggers, and most of the images were provided by professional fashion photographers.

The amateur-driven and professional fashion blogs represented different approaches to blogging, but they were also defined by a shared field, fashion. Also, the blogging tools and the blog format provided a new, common framework for conveying and interacting about fashion. In that sense, the different types of fashion blogs constituted a specific genre for communication and interaction in relation to fashion that emerged in parallel with other interest-oriented online blogs. Like these, fashion blogs were based on a shared understanding between bloggers and their readers about content and interaction format.

From the outset, the fashion blog as a genre offered a user-driven approach to fashion communication that was enabled technically by blogging tools that provided a regular design framework for setting up and publishing content. As a new feature, the blogger did not need to know HTML programming in order to set up a website but could simply use the pre-defined tools to create the site. On the other hand, early blogging tools only featured a limited number of options in terms of visual layout and graphic identity.

Today, the private and professional blogs form opposite ends of the web genre of fashion blogs, and several hybrid forms have seen the light of day with very different ways of representing and interacting about fashion. This article presents four types of fashion blogs as the main approaches in the fashion blog genre. The focus of the presentation will be on the design aspect of the fashion blogs, including the graphic-visual and image dimensions and the analyses of social self-presentation strategies that fashion blogging enables. We have labelled the four fashion blog types *The Professionals* (blogs produced by fashion magazines), *Fashionindustrias* (reporting on professional style subjects of the fashion industry), *Street Style*

(reporting on real people found in the street) and *Narcissus* (public DIY fashion diary).

In the following, these four types will be analysed with a view to identifying both the specific design strategies they represent and the visual preferences on which they are based. The analysis is framed by the claim that the blogs promote established structures in the fashion system by virtue of their chosen presentation form and content. The primary focus of the analysis will be on *Fashionindustrias*, *Street Style* and *Narcissus*, with the main emphasis on the latter blog type. As it will be demonstrated, there are fluid transitions among the types, and in practice there is a wide range of mix forms.

2 The professionals: blogs produced by fashion magazines

We define the first blog type in the fashion blog genre as '*the professional fashion blog: blogs produced by fashion magazines*'. As described above, this type emerges around 2005/2006, as the webzine editions of established fashion magazines begin to integrate blog modules in their websites in addition to the traditional fashion material, drawing on inspiration from the first private fashion blogs.² The content is provided by fashion journalists, but soon successful amateur bloggers also begin to appear as guest writers. The graphic-visual aspect of the blogging modules are an integrated part of the visual identity of the fashion magazines. The illustrations are provided by professional photographers, but fashion journalists also begin to use the private bloggers' more snapshot-like and amateur-documentarist approach, taking their own photos at fashion shows.³

In that sense, the professional fashion blog combines existing communication formats and conventions taken both from private fashion blogs and from professional webzines, the latter largely continuing the conventions of the print fashion magazine. With reference to the media researchers Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's (1999) concept of *remediation*, the combination of existing communication conventions

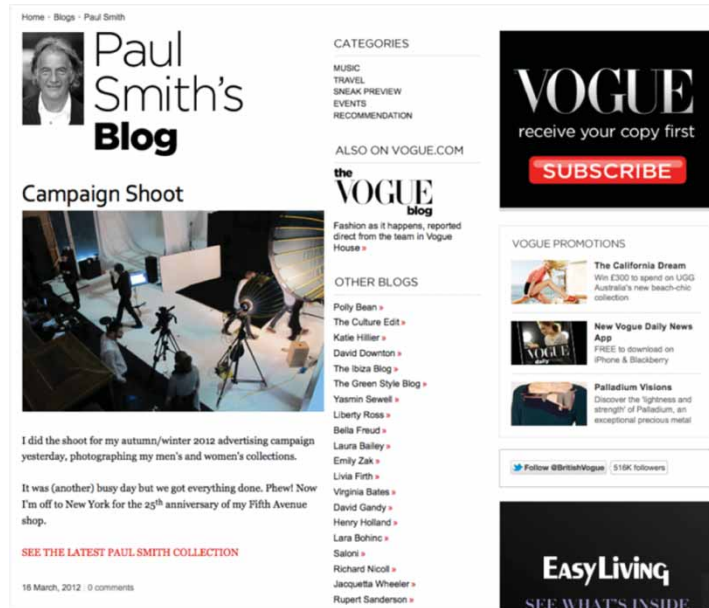


Figure 1. One example of the fashion blogging category 'The Professionals: blogs produced by fashion magazines'. On the website of the British edition of Vogue, a blog module has been added, with the blog divided into personal diaries of various celebrities. Shown here is a screen capture from a section where the designer Paul Smith blogs about his work. The cooperation between Smith as blogger and Vogue as media functions as a co-branding between two different types of professional fashion actors. The fashion medium Vogue uses one of the most well-known British fashion designers as content provider and thus signals exclusivity and insider knowledge. At the same time, the Paul Smith fashion and designer house promotes its brand as editorial content through the blogging.

in new contexts, has been described as a phenomenon that is characteristic of new media: they reproduce and vary the communication forms and conventions of existing media. Here, the concept can form the basis for describing how the fashion blog reproduces existing offline and online formats in a way that helps establish a communication contract between the senders and recipients of the content. The integration with the presentation form of the private blog and the interactive options for user response serve to vary and expand the established formats of the fashion medium, and a new sub-genre emerges.

An example of a professional fashion blog that is defined by a mix of established communication conventions is Bazaar.com's blog Bazar Report. The blog is presented in a simple layout whose visual design identity is linked with both the printed and the digital Bazaar magazine. On the content side, the blog combines professional

catwalk reports, similar to those from the established magazines, with visual trend reports and snapshots from private bloggers on the street level.

Another example of a professional blog is the one operated by the fashion magazine Vogue.co.uk. Here, too, the visual aesthetics of the fashion magazine is mixed with an amateur approach where famous models and designers appear as private bloggers, sometimes using their own snapshots, sometimes borrowing photos of catwalk presentations or street fashion.

Another blog, Stylefile, operated by the webzine Style.com, which is published by Condé Nast, the owner of the fashion magazines Vogue, W and Glamour, is almost a webzine in its own right. The text is provided by professional fashion writers, and the illustrations are highly aestheticised professional advertising shots of fashion products and real-life pictures of celebri-

ties in combination with amateur photos from the private blogosphere.

In contrast to the private fashion blogs, the professional blogs involve little or no exchange with the public. The blogs interact mainly via links with other semi-professional and private blogs, the status of the latter changes when they are incorporated into and circulated via the professional blogs, as they reach a wider readership and sometimes even become a platform for advertising.

Overall, the professional blogs are characterised by a complex authorship that includes the magazine's own writers, invited writers and the bloggers they link and refer to; thus, the blogs define a new communication space, tied together by mutual links among blogs and by the bloggers who write, read and comment. As a genre form the professional fashion blog is defined by conventions that are shared between the senders and recipients of fashion blogs. These conventions are remediated and varied by the ways in which individual fashion magazines combine convention-driven content and image components and by the ways in which they shape a specific visual design identity that distinguishes and positions the blog in relation to competing blogs.

3 Fashionindustrias: reporting on professional style subjects and the fashion industry

Another important blog type within the genre of fashion blogs, what we call *Fashionindustrias*, is typically run by fashion industry professionals such as stylists, journalists, models or photographers with access to the prestigious, professional fashion events, e.g. the ready-to-wear luxury fashion shows in Paris and Milan. However, there are also examples of successful amateur bloggers who blog about themselves or who comment on various fashion elements (e.g. images, styles, rumours and adverts) found in magazines or on the internet (what we call *borrowed visuals*), who have been 'discovered' by the fashion industry and gained access to the professional fashion events.

Fashionindustrias blogs can be characterised as semi-professional, micro-media publishing of the fashion industry events.⁴ The blog type revolves largely around high fashion matter, the desire-stimulating fashion presentations (especially catwalk shows but also including other types of promotional events) existing within the luxury fashion field; a key presupposition is access to the most lucrative fashion events. This access can be understood as access to fashion shows, which are normally restricted to the press, buyers, celebrities and other fashion professionals. However, it is also a question of the bloggers' ability to be present in the metropolises where the most important fashion events take place.

An example of the Fashionindustrias type is the French blog www.garancedore.fr, established in June 2006 by the blogger Garance Doré. Originally the blog was a forum for exhibiting Doré's interpretation of the era's fashion through fashion illustrations, combined with text descriptions of events and fashion tendencies. Due to a growing interest from the audience in the years that followed, the [garancedore.fr](http://www.garancedore.fr) was expanded with street shots of fashionable people with primarily high fashion content: close-ups of fashionable women's handbags; shoes; jewellery; and full body shots of beautiful women who pose for Doré on the street. The design of www.garancedore.fr is executed in WordPress and follows the classic blog format of a continuing scroll list of image chapters with headlines, content categories (Categories in WordPress) such as *Beauté*, *Dressing*, *Fashion Week Diary* and *From the Front Row*. In contrast to the fashion blogs of the professional fashion magazines, the comment areas of [garancedore](http://www.garancedore.fr) contains a large amount of user feedback. Since the autumn of 2009, the blog has also contained a small section with videos, especially from fashion shows, shot by Doré herself with a handheld camera, probably a cell phone. In February 2012, www.garancedore.fr brought the first example of a commercial video collaboration between Doré and the international shopping website Net-a-Porter, which is owned by the luxury corporation Richemont. In the video

series, 'Pardon My French', which is professionally produced, we follow Garance Doré attending fashion weeks in New York and Paris. The videos are published on YouTube and embedded in the fashion blog.

Another example of the Fashionindustrias blog-type is <http://jakandjil.com>, founded in 2008 by the Canadian photographer Tommy Ton, one of the most cutting edge semi-professional fashion blogs, with over 1.5 million 'hits' per month (Milner 2011). In terms of design, Jakandjil can be defined as a photo blog with a small amount of text that documents models, spectators, celebrities and fashion editors during the major international fashion weeks. The blog is a variant of street style photo blogging, but with a focus on the apparel worn by the (hyper-) staged professionals of the fashion industry while they attend the fashion week events.

The Fashionindustrias blogging phenomenon reinforces the fashion aestheticisation of (fashion industry) people in the real world. In the context of fashion events, especially in relation to fashion shows, those who allow themselves to appear excessive, elegant and seductive in accordance with fashion conventions become potential style icons for the omnipresent cameras. While the established fashion media traditionally focus on celebrities in the audience and models on the catwalk, the fashion bloggers now cover all corners of the prestigious fashion events, both within the restricted areas and outside on the street and in lines of people waiting in front of the fashion venue. The bloggers can be said to express a form of auteur performance, which is defined by the art of finding and selecting stylish persons and the desirable objects they wear, and preferably people who are not well known. This can be seen as a form of remediation that clearly creates an influence on the social level: the paradoxical extension of the anonymous into the arena of the celebrity. Because the established fashion media publishing houses now tend to take up the bloggers' perspectives, especially in their internet versions, anyone who participates in the professional fashion events can potentially end up being media-transmitted icons of

the moment. There has long existed a kind of conscious fashion performative self-staging among the professionals who participate in fashion fairs and fashion weeks, a kind of imitation or reference to the fashion aestheticisation which exists in the established fashion media. However, this logic of personal appearance is reinforced by the presence of the blogger. Now, it is not only an affair of the moment and of the professional peer group. It can also end up in the (internet) media. Just as the fashion media aestheticises and promotes the objects of fashion, the fashion professionals of real life, including the bloggers themselves, now form a kind of medium for fashion's physical 'stuff of desire'. For example, someone wearing a pair of extravagantly high-heeled Christian Louboutin stiletto heels with the famous red undersole, or a Hermès Birkin handbag can easily become a magnet for the cameras. The established luxury fashion objects continually end up as close-up shots on the fashion blogs, and subsequently profusely commented upon by users around the world. Via the bloggers' presentation of images, there occurs a constant user co-production of fashion meaning and 'diffusion of desire'. This certainly explains why bloggers have been received with such enthusiasm by the fashion industry.

The bloggers thus reproduce many of the hierarchies and traditions familiar from the fashion industry. The fashion shows of the well-known designers in the leading fashion capitals such as Milan or Paris are unobtainable 'stuff of dreams' for bloggers around the world. The few bloggers who manage to obtain access to a luxury fashion media event achieve a kind of blogger celebrity status, with a large army of readers, including other bloggers, who are inspired by them. It is not uncommon for bloggers who gain access to the prestigious fashion shows to publish 'I did it' photos and even exhibit their invitation cards, a demonstration of their place in the fashion hierarchy. The most successful Fashionindustrias bloggers can be seen as freelance fashion journalists and micro-publishers who run their own mass-media outlet through the internet, but coexisting

JAK & JIL



Figure 2. The Fashionindustrias blog 'Jak & Jil' photo documents professionals who visit the international fashion weeks. There is a special focus on the fashion products worn by these persons off the catwalk, rather than the fashion collections shown on the podiums. The woman seen in the photo is an example of the fashion-aestheticised individuals, people who dress up for their professional fashion peers and for the omnipresent cameras that watch over the prestigious fashion events, thanks especially to the bloggers.

with the known fashion journalists from the major fashion media.

4 Street Style: reporting on real people found in the streets

A third blog type, what we call *Street Style* blogs, are characterised by a primary focus on documenting real people's style at street level in big-city environments. The visual presentation form is snapshots, hastily made photographic framings of people on the street who the photographer/blogger has chosen to depict. The pictures are documentary; some photos show people who apparently do not know that they have been photographed, others pose in front of the camera and perform the double gaze of seeing and being seen. In contrast to the classic fashion photo, which tends to focus on highly stylised fashion photographic conventions, the presentations of the Street Style blog focuses on the person who

wears the clothing. This person is not a model, but a 'real person' whose unique style or appearance has aroused the blogger's attention and curiosity. The snapshot-like character of the photographs mimics the realistic photo genre. The visual authenticity of the street style blogs is considered more credible, being less 'artificial' than stylised fashion images. The amateur-like fashion picture thus continues some of the documentaristic realism characteristic of the early days of photography, where the photograph was 'evidence of the real', giving the pictures a kind of magical quality in connection to their documentary quality. The snapshot photos of normal people on the street enable the blogger to create a trade-off: the fashion blog's readers are willing to compromise with the quality of the photographs in order to experience authentic presentations of actual street trends. Within the framework of the blog, the photographs and the commentaries which accompany them create a special communi-

cative community in favour of the sender, and the communities which emerge around the Street Style blogger are communities of taste, insofar as they form around the blogger's judgment of taste, a judgment shared (or in some instances disputed) by the loyal readers.

In its focus on the style of the street, the Street Style blog also helps support the trend systems that have characterised the diffusion of fashion tendencies since the interwar years, whereby the style of the street and subculture of youth have been essential sources of inspiration for the established fashion industry, a process known in fashion studies as a 'bubble-up strategy'.⁵ By being basically independent of the established fashion media, the Street Style blog functions as an extra mediating link between the style of the street and the level of trend forecasters and style surfers on whom the fashion media and fashion producers rely in order to catch and predict trends. Street Style blogs can thus be seen as a remediation of the trend forecasters' predictions and mood-boards. However, if the bloggers are successful, they begin to interact with or are 'elevated' into the established media system.

One example of a Street Style blog is TheSartorialist.com, founded in 2005 by the American Scott Schuman and which is now one of the most popular and media-cited style blogs.⁶ In terms of design, The Sartorialist appears as a professional webzine with a menu line at the top listing specific topics. Under the menu are photo insertions which, in accordance with the blog's format, are presented with the most recent entry first. In terms of content, the blog consist of photographs of people on the street; trendsetters and stylish people are photographed primarily in the fashion metropolises of Milan, Paris and especially New York. In the photographs, people pose in front of the photographer in half or full figure, and with street milieu as background. The Sartorialist rarely carries photos taken during catwalk shows. Focus is on idealised people in the street, not the professionals of the fashion industry.

Another example of Street Style blogs is Stil In Berlin <http://stilinberlin.blogspot.com>, established in 2006. Stil In Berlin is more locally grounded,

focusing only on individuals and shops in Berlin with the same documentary-style character as The Sartorialist, and with its own photography and commentaries. The success of this blog has led it to become a platform for advertisements, such that the snapshot photos' documentary entries and informal commentaries are supplemented by professionally aestheticised images of commodities and fashion products.

In FaceHunter, founded in 2006 by the photographer Yvan Rodic, the transition from amateur to professional blog is reflected in the disappearance of 'stylish' people found in the streets. Today the blog content is primarily centred on fashion professionals visiting the city during fashion weeks, and the images are subsequently used in fashion magazines.

5 Narcissus: the personal diary

The fourth and last blog type in the genre of fashion blogs we call *Narcissus*, with reference to the Greek mythological figure who fell in love with his own image. Centred around young women who put themselves on display, Narcissus is one of the most widespread fashion blog forms. The content consists primarily of snapshots from the private sphere, but all arranged around the blogger's style and interest in fashion. In terms of genre, the Narcissus blog can be seen as a re-mediation of the personal diary or performative self-narrative. It seeks to establish an open and reflective circulation between the fashion blogger, who shows herself and her style, and the reader, who is following the blogger.⁷ In traditional self-narrative performances, the oral act is articulated, it objectifies the performance, and it opens the way for an evaluation from an audience. In this sense, the performance is reflexive, in that it becomes an objective for itself.⁸ In the fashion blog, the written and the visual also become an object of itself, a reflexive project, which is authored by the fashion blogger in the expectation that it will be read and evaluated by the audience.

At the same time, the personal fashion blog also seems to open up for a dynamic and processual relation between the author's private life and

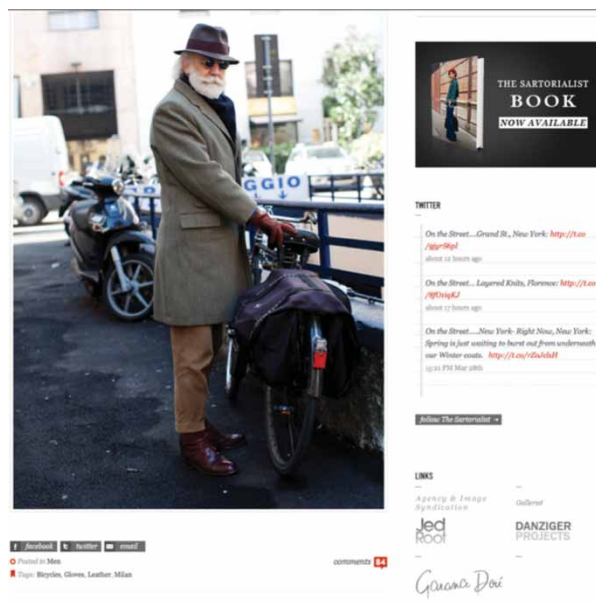


Figure 3. The Sartorialist belongs to the 'Street Style' category of fashion blogs: reporting on real people found in the streets. It was founded by the American photographer Scott Schuman in 2005. Today it is one of the world's most well-known style blogs. Schuman can be recognised as a kind of the postmodern August Sander of blogging: a documentary photographer who makes portraits of selected people whom he discovers in the daily life of the big-city environments. Typically, his subjects are stylish or unusual, and a recurring theme is the male dandy.

the blog's visual content. The self-presentation signals the open and composite nature of the blog, i.e. both the self as the blog's character of 'patchwork' and the reflexive play which takes place between the self, life, text and reader/spectator. The Narcissus fashion blog provides daily news with a personal imprint, and it offers the possibility for direct dialogue and exchange of experiences with the readers. The blog is a conversationally based online dialogue, driven by the blogger's personal fashion interests and style universe. At the same time, however, the personal blog also appropriates features from the traditional fashion magazines' editorial content categories, such as the style diary (photos of what a given person was wearing during a given period), new purchases for the closet and snapshots of style-conscious people on the street. The visual form is a combination of informal snapshots and an attempt to imitate the professionally staged fashion images.

The virtual friendship of which the fashion bloggers are part exists by virtue of the personal and intimate way of communicating. The blog is something between autobiography and diary, and the blogger speaks from an ethos-based position (Sørensen 2008). It is a form of communication where the decisive elements are the retrospective, the narrative construction, the interest for character formation and anchoring in an actual identity. A form of reader contact is established which signals the serious effort to tell about one's life honestly and truthfully (ibid.). In a fashion blogging context, however, the narratives are centred primarily on the fashion materials and the blogger's fashion-oriented appearance and habitus.

With its simple graphic tools and poor picture resolution, the visual quality of the Narcissus blog cannot measure up to the more glitzy visual quality of the fashion magazines. On the other hand, it represents a unique visual authenticity. The images on the private fashion blog mimic the rea-

listic snapshot genres, and therefore appear more authentic and believable for the readers because the photos appear more 'realistic' than the hyper-staged photography of the fashion magazines. Narcissus bloggers often start their blogging career with a mixture of borrowed visuals and snapshots from their own lives. Gradually, as they obtain more experience and greater audience success, they begin to prioritise their own material. On seaofshoes.typepad.com, started in 2007, the American Jane Aldridge stages her diary as if it were the content elements of a women's magazine. Categories such as food, design, travel impressions, 'Show me your closet', 'My home', 'Café visits' and shopping experiences come from the blogger's own life and camera, and this content is then combined in the classic blogging scroll-down format with picture sequences of borrowed visuals, usually professional fashion pictures from catwalk shows and individual fashion magazines. The blog presents overviews of the season's fashion through packshots of objects familiar to the reader from women's and fashion magazines, but here the borrowed visuals are linked to fashion shopping sites, especially Net-A-Porter, where the blogger's selected taste can be purchased. In this way, the site obtains a service function, matching that of women's and fashion magazines; it becomes an edited selection of the season's fashion which serves as a buying inspiration for the readers. The primary visual content of seaofshoes.typepad.com consists of sequences of the blogger's own amateur editorial fashion spreads, where Jane Aldridge is dressed in her own clothes, e.g. out in nature. We do not know who has taken these photos, probably a fiancé or friend. The fashion pictures of Aldridge herself show mixtures of fashion from different epochs and seasons, but throughout, there is strong emphasis on 'objects of desire' produced by the luxury fashion companies, usually highlighted by text captions like 'I wore my favorite patent Alaia platforms and '80s Claude Montana pants'. In the blog, Aldridge functions as model, editor, reviewer, photographer, media and style icon, and her version of Narcissus is an expression of a kind of hyperrealistic everyday life published

in photo and diary form, all documented on the blog, with content that mimics the aestheticisation of women's and fashion magazines. Unlike Fashionindustrias, however, it is Aldridge herself who is at the centre. The purpose of the blog is not to report from the fashion weeks.

Another example of a Narcissus blog is the Mexican Andrea Torres' blog www.stylescrapbook.com, founded in 2007 and based in Amsterdam. The blog focuses mostly on 'affordable dress'. Torres is a kind of stylist for the people who translates the expensive looks from fashion shows and stores into affordable outfits. Because bloggers such as Aldridge and Torres do not use professional fashion photography teams with flash studio light, make-up artists, stylists, assistants, etc., they seldom achieve the high fashion 'dream glamour' feel of the magazine fashion spreads. Compared to the established fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* and *Numéro*, the fashion self-aestheticisation of the bloggers is amateurish, but this makes it achievable for their peer groups.

Bryanboy.com, founded in October 2004, is a hybrid between the Narcissus and Fashionindustrias blog, with 1.4 million page views per month.⁹ Here, the Filipino Bryan Grey Yambao reports from the international fashion weeks, while also displaying himself in his own gay male fashion extravagance. He uses semi-professional fashion spreads combined with documentary snapshots from various fashion events and luxury settings.¹⁰ Yambao resembles the well-known fashion journalists and editors of the large fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley but he is using his own media and he has a far greater focus on his own appearance. Yambao's pictures, his reports from the fashion weeks and his access to the show universe of luxury fashion have made him into a fashion niche personality; and his notoriety enhances his possibility for access, i.e. a synergy effect.

The Narcissus blog offers the blogger a special way of constituting the subject through self-staging. Using Anthony Giddens's terminology, one can say that the blog is used as a tool in the individual's reflexive project (Giddens 1991, 12).

The fashion blog becomes a part of the blogger's identity work. The accounts from the blogger's real life, like the thematic articles in women's magazines, have a practical function as sparring partner for the reader/viewer's own personal life project, a project which must ultimately pass its test in relation to others.

An obvious central focal point of the contemporary (luxury) fashion is youthful female beauty and seduction; this is clearly reflected in global fashion images and various promotional fashion activities. Today, feminine beauty is no longer profane; rather it is produced as a dream image for mass consumption, 'the commercial beauty, is a functionalised beauty in the service of promoting the brands and the turnover of the industries of the imaginary [industries de l'imaginaire]' (Lipovetsky 1997, 182–183). The Narcissus blogger subject becomes part of the fashion seduction and beauty circulation but on a more ordinary level if compared to the glamour of high fashion magazines; the blogger is positioned on the level of the everyday person. However, as a real-life and yet virtual girlfriend, she helps her readers to navigate in the endless amount of fashion possibilities. She becomes an editor or counselling guide for her virtual friends as well as a cultural intermediary, albeit on an amateur level. The Narcissus blogger interprets the fashion standards of seduction and beauty present in the time, and she acts out the seductive taste through her selected costumes, bodyprops, and self-display. She offers her personalised style, usually a remediation of the editorial forms know from the glossy fashion magazines, for others to emulate.

6 The reproduction of the fashion system

In terms of graphics and visual presentation, the various blogs resemble the webzines of professional fashion media, which also appear with simple layouts. They use primarily achromatic colours, white, black or grey, forming a graphic background for the fashion content. A grid-divided matrix governs the placement of images and text. The graphic layout is partly determined

by the predefined layout of the blog tools. However, despite the fact that they have the possibility for graphic and layout differentiation, they largely replicate the established matrices for layout, which to a great extent are based on classical modernist conventions from the print-based media. Thus, neither fashion media nor fashion blogs deviate significantly from the conventional graphic layout format found among established networks of graphic professionals and designers. In the digital fashion blogs, it becomes a conventional means of communicating content. The blogs differentiate themselves primarily in terms of content, and this is through their strategies for selecting and presenting the visual and text materials. These materials can be self-produced or they may be ready-mades, borrowed visuals, or retrieved from different contexts and presented in new ways. For the viewer, the blogs offer the possibility for inspiration, identification and leisure. Interaction with the blog occurs through scrolling, browsing or by contributing with comments and links, as a digital variant of the shopper strolling the streets. With its multifaceted visibility and interactive character, the fashion blogs, constitutes a bricolage-like spectacle aimed at leisure, consumption and individual fulfilment. Taken together, the fashion blogs are a composite genre of different visual and content strategies for presenting fashion.

While the blogs have provided new ways of presenting and interacting with fashion, they also reproduce the established fashion media strategies in terms of graphic layout and the special aesthetic visibility, which characterises the classic fashion image. Fashion blogging has also developed new fashion narrative genre forms, e.g. the snapshot, the documentary real-life street photo and amateur self-presentation versions of the editorial fashion spreads know from the fashion magazines. The Narcissus fashion bloggers often dissolve the seasonal cycles of the fashion industry. They do not just present the newest apparel. New and old are constantly mixed; the presentation revolves around what the fashion blogger herself is wearing. Here, the fashion blogger is model, reviewer and publicist, and in some cases even

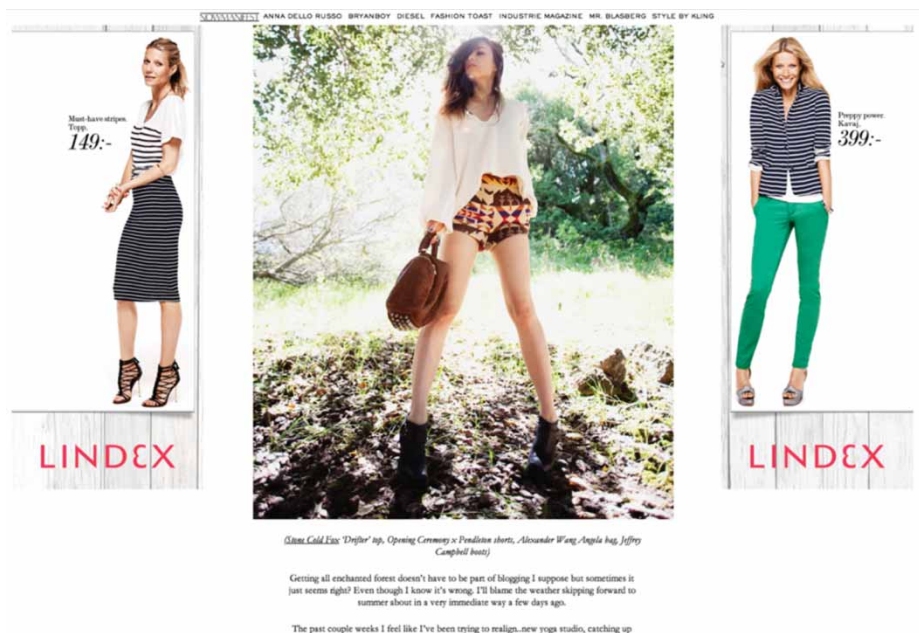


Figure 4. Screen capture of www.fashiontoast.com, founded in 2007 by former professional model Rumi Neely. Neely uses different photographers to depict her in a kind of everyday fashion spread where she displays herself and her clothing. She also contributes to the blog with her own photographs, snapshots of sunsets, party situations, shop interiors and especially shots from fashion shows. But fashiontoast.com is primarily a Narcissus blog where Rumi Neely presents herself to the world. The content of the blog in the middle is flanked on both sides by automatically inserted advertisement images.

designer.¹¹ In relation to the total fashion system, fashion blogging has contributed to breaking down the historical monopoly of the fashion magazines in disseminating fashion. A new hierarchy in fashion has been established, where, for example, a 14-year-old blogger can sit on the first row of fashion shows alongside world-renowned editors from the established fashion media. In addition, fashion blogging has introduced some other temporal conditions for the production and distribution of fashion content. The ultra-short publication cycle of the net media means that bloggers can be several steps ahead of the printed magazines, who traditionally have a production time of between five and eight weeks. In principle, content can be blogged or tweeted directly from the fashion shows. The rapid expansion and readership success of fashion blogs has made the fashion houses become acutely aware of the power of bloggers

as both arbiters of taste and as trendsetters. Further, under cover of being democratic and authentic, gonzo journalism can function as both hidden advertisement and as dissemination mechanism for new trends.

Despite its apparent independence, the fashion blog has become an integrated part of the cultural circulation of fashion, joining an ever more complex system of crossovers and cross-references between platforms and media. Fashion blogs help to support already established preferences in relation to the fashion, which circulates globally through fashion media, fashion shows and fashion consumers. In this way, fashion blogs are now yet another element in the material, informational and imagined tunnels of fashion matter or scapes.¹² These fashionscapes should be recognised as global configurations of fashion content, visual, physical as well as mental, being circulated around the globe. They are hybrids, so

they are both tangible, informational and imaginary; partly social structures and partly object worlds that bind people and places together across time and space. They encapsulate people in networks of social and economic interdependence. Alternatively to or in parallel with regional, national and religious affiliations, fashionscapes play a key role in the identity constructions across the globe, although they are subject to local interpretations. They are centred around specific fashion content in the sense of fashion as a feminised culture industry, including the image traditions of this industry. They affect consumption as well as production practices.

Like the other media in fashion, fashion blogs become important facilitators of identity construction. However, the personal blogs also end up supporting established (especially) luxury fashion brands. From the perspective of the fashion producers, the blogs can be viewed as a form of user-generated marketing. Though spontaneous and uncontrolled, this user-marketing nevertheless promotes already established preference-systems in the global fashion consumer culture. From a network theory perspective, the blogs reveal a 'preferential attachment' to especially the luxury fashion companies and their objects.¹³ Many bloggers and consumers openly prefer to connect themselves via (digital) links to the luxury fashion brands, design celebrities and to desirable products. This generates 'aristocratic networks' where one can observe a 'power-law organising': new elements prefer to connect themselves to those elements in the network that already have a large number of connections, i.e. to a 'hub'.¹⁴ In the fashion system, this logic shows itself when certain fashion products and brands acquire a large shared consumer desire value. Fashion bloggers explicitly link their content to these products, brands or designer personalities, so that the luxury fashion entities come to rank higher in the system. They become hubs in the network. Luxury fashion companies typically possess one of the important properties that generate preferential attachment: age. They have existed for a long time in the network (as information in a broader sense); and having existed for many years, they have had

time to be disseminated as desirable in people's consciousness (Hansen-Hansen 2008, 202). It is highly plausible that fashion blogs follow the omnipresent network power-laws with 'rich-get-richer effects', known from the internet's topologies. As is generally true of the internet, a few blogs have many readers, while most blogs have few readers.¹⁵ Here it is also important to underscore how the printed fashion media's references and reviews of fashion blogs have helped create the 'rich-get-richer effect': some fashion blogs are repeatedly highlighted as cutting edge, producing favourable conditions for them to achieve more preferential attachment from other bloggers, newspapers and fashion magazines. It appears that the established fashion media can actually create fashion bloggers as hubs.

Even though fashion blogging is a new type of parallel fashion media, it has many similarities with the traditional fashion and women's magazines. The printed fashion magazines exist by providing readers for advertisers. The magazines have two basic components: the advertisements that are inserted and paid for by fashion and cosmetic companies, and the editorial content produced by the magazine itself in order to entertain and inform its readers. The same pattern exists among fashion bloggers. They prefer to have their own editorial content, which they themselves produce, but they also carry advertisements which are automatically inserted, typically in the margins and/or top banners, via for example, Google AdSense. Successful fashion bloggers can make extra income by exchanging services with fashion houses and fashion media, e.g. as writers, image providers, stylists or consultants. In contrast to the editorial content providers of the fashion magazines, fashion bloggers have no executive editor or advertising departments with whom they must negotiate internally. They have full control over their own micro media house. However, even though they are masters of their own publishing domain, they run into the same problem as the traditional fashion media in the commercial fashion system: 'You cannot bite the hand that feeds you.' If a blogger is to have any hope of gaining access to fashion shows, she

must refrain from criticising the major fashion producing firms. Therefore, it is in the fashion bloggers' self-interest to exercise a kind of restraint. They must avoid being too negative toward the fashion system.¹⁶ Hence, despite their apparent independence and user-driven character, the fashion blog is also a part of fashion's economic and consumer-oriented system. In general, the fashion bloggers celebrate and aestheticise the products and brands of fashion. Like the fashion magazines, the fashion bloggers are in the service of the fashion system, as yet another mass media disseminating positive ideas and images of desirable, beautiful women, fashion products and brands. As such, they support the global consumer culture's language of desire. The Narcissus blogger displays her hyperrealistic everyday life under the sign of fashion.

Notes

- ¹ The first free blogging tool, blogger.com, was launched in 1990, and from then on the blogging phenomenon saw rapid growth with regard to the possibilities offered by the tools and the number of users (see, for example, Thompson 2006; Rosenberg 2009). Most of the research into the blog phenomenon so far has occurred within the fields of media studies (e.g. Keren 2006; Tremayne 2006), sociology (e.g. Walker Rettberg 2008), literature studies (Sørensen 2008) and marketing studies (Zarella 2010; Singh, Veron-Jackson, and Cullinane 2008; Scott 2011); however, it has not been the focus of attention in a design context.
- ² Examples of webzines include style.com, vogue.co.uk, vogue.fr, harpersbazaar.com, instyle.com, glamourmagazine.co.uk, nylonmag.com, i-donline.com and selfservicemagazine.com.
- ³ There are also online versions of professional fashion magazines and purely web-based professional fashion magazines that have not absorbed blog elements into their content. However, our focus in the category 'The Professionals' solely includes the professional fashion webzines that have absorbed content elements and conventions from the blogosphere in their design and content strategy.
- ⁴ There are various types of fashion blogs based entirely on borrowed visuals that are related to the category Fashionindustrias, i.e. fashion blogs centered on celebrity style or specific objects like handbags.
- ⁵ The bubble-up theory, sometimes called trickle-up theory, is a fashion diffusion theory used to explain occurrences of style that emerge from lower classes or subcultural tribes and subsequently gets introduced into luxury fashion design and adopted by the higher strata of society (Polhemus, 2007). The blue jeans and the biker leather jacket are two widely used examples. The bubble-up theory can in some respect be seen as the reverse trickle-down theory; the latter being associated with early theories of fashion, e.g. Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen, who recognised fashion as class differentiation; a way for elite classes to differentiate themselves through new styles of fashion and/or conspicuous consumption. However, the trickle-down and bubble-up diffusion have the same internal logic: one group of people invent or use a style to set them self apart from other groups; when the style over time is adapted by a larger segment of the population, the first group must invent a new style in order to be different again.
- ⁶ In 2009, Penguin published Scott Schuman's big city documentary portraits in the book entitled *The Sartorialist*, which had sold over 100,000 copies. Schuman's success with *The Sartorialist* also led to a period of cooperation with Condé Nast's webzine, style.com. According to *The Business of Fashion* newsletter, *The Sartorialist* had approximately 13 million page views for the month of September 2011 (Amed 2011).
- ⁷ In this sense, the personal fashion blog does not distinguish itself significantly from other private and special interest blogs which also perpetuate traditional genre forms such as the personal diary and the performative self-narrative. See also Sørensen (2008, 9). However, on another level, the fashion blog is radically different to other types of personal blogs: The fashion blog is strongly interconnected with the seduction and desire of the fashion world, global images of desire, and commercial luxury objects of desire. Perhaps most important, the fashion blog, and particularly the Narcissus blog, offers endless possibilities to assert and produce potential female erotic capital, at least for the author but possibly equally for the viewers, as they engage with the blog as a mirror for personal adornment and beautification. For erotic capital, see Hakim (2010).
- ⁸ On blogs as performative self-accounts, see also Sørensen (2008, 42.)

- ⁹ according to WWD November 2011, 1.4 million page views, see Rachel Strugatz (2011).
- ¹⁰ A special male gay fashion aestheticisation, where objects of clothing associated with the feminine are consciously used as means of 'appearance' by men. The fashion industry has long been a magnet for various male homosexuals, e.g. fashion journalists, stylists, hairdressers, make-up artists. Many of the well-known male chief designers are also declared homosexuals, among them Karl Lagerfeld, Alexander McQueen, Yves Saint Laurent and Tom Ford. Bryan repeats several of the rituals known from the fashion industry's male homosexual, flamboyant male attire, with feminine markers such as ladies handbags and special mannered postures.
- ¹¹ For example, the Swedish fashion blogger Elin Kling, who made a co-design project with H&M in February 2011.
- ¹² Theoretically, we view these fashion tunnels as related to the metaphors of 'scapes' developed by sociologists such as John Urry (2000) and Manuel Castels (2000) and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996). On 'fashionscapes', see Erik Hansen-Hansen (2008, 222–224).
- ¹³ For 'preferential attachment' and network theory, see, for example, Albert-László Barabási (2002, 86–91).
- ¹⁴ The rich-gets-richer phenomenon with clustering can be observed within many types of networks, both in natural and in human systems. Cf. Mark Buchanan (2002, 117).
- ¹⁵ See for example Broder et al. (2000, 309–320).
- ¹⁶ This only applies for the type of fashion bloggers who try to cover high fashion professional events. There exist numerous of bloggers who are engaged in critique of the established commercial fashion world and the various prestigious high fashion objects. But they should perhaps rather be defined as anti-fashion or alternative fashion bloggers.

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- Ida Engholm** has an MA in Danish Literature and Art History and a PhD in Digital Design. She is Associate Professor and Head of Education at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation.
- Erik Hansen-Hansen** has an MSc in Information Technology and a PhD in Fashion Design. He is Research Assistant Professor and course leader for the Master of Design programme at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation.