

Fashion media

Fashion blogs: trickle-up fashion criticism

Lorynn Divita

Abstract

Critics complain that runway reviews in traditional media have ceased to be critical in large part because fashion magazines have become beholden to designers due to their reliance on advertising dollars. Reviewers' fears of offending designers and losing revenue or future access to a designer and their collections have eliminated negative reviews. However, a new medium of runway critique has surfaced that is unencumbered by advertising or a personal relationship between editors and designers. In a true example of 'trickle-up' fashion, blogs have become a new source of fashion information and critiques for readers all over the world and are regarded by readers as more truthful than traditional outlets. As fitting a new medium, these gatekeepers of fashion do not adhere to journalistic convention. Unlike famous fashion editors such as Anna Wintour and Nina Garcia, these reviewers are anonymous and do not even post their photos on their web sites. Most don't attend the fashion shows they review, relying on websites such as style.com for their material. Many do not claim to have any professional training in journalism or the fashion industry, yet they show a keen eye for style and a sharp wit that resonates with readers. This paper will look at some of the most popular fashion blogs including *IamFashion*, *Go Fug Yourself* and *Manolo's Shoeblog* and discuss what makes them relevant to readers and an integral part of today's fashion industry, yet sets them apart from the mainstream fashion media. Also discussed is how a whole group of bloggers originally positioned as irreverent renegades have instead become recognized as authorities in their fields. For example, some forty bloggers received official press passes from IMG to cover Olympus Fashion week this year, and several have crossed over to writing fashion reviews for mainstream media.

Keywords:
Internet,
blogs,
fashion criticism

Introduction

A 'blog' (derived from the term 'web log') is commonly known as "a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic" (Wikipedia.org, 2007). Fashion blogs occupy a significant percentage of online blogs, totaling about 2 million, or slightly less than 10 percent of the 2.7 billion blogs tracked by Technorati Inc., with new blogs being created everyday (Corcoran, 2006). The blogs tend to be highly personal, with bloggers writing about their own personal favorite subjects and their likes and dislikes. Many blogs feature a mix of product endorsements, pop culture and fashion commentary, and are seen by many journalists to be "democratizing fashion commentary" (La Ferla, 2005). Now, anyone with an opinion and a basic understanding of the internet can be a fashion critic.

Because of the internet, trends can now spread without promotion of traditional media such as magazines. In this way, the Internet serves as a virtual street, permitting individuals to see and get inspiration from other people around the world. This differs from the traditional life of a trend from style setters (usually celebrities) being featured in the media and people adopting the look (Karimzadeh, Carmon, & Corcoran, 2006). Bloggers have helped to speed up an already fast fashion cycle by posting and commenting on runway trends as soon as they are shown. With thousands of readers, they can help promote trends and brands or condemn them without the same fear of retribution from designers that fashion magazines face (Kay, 2007). The influence of blogging is evident as US online advertising revenue, some of which is dedicated to blogs, was more than \$10 billion in 2005 and is projected to increase 22% annually until it reaches \$27.3 billion by 2010. (Dodes, 2006)

In addition to general fashion blogs that provide commentary on a wide range of topics within the fashion industry, some fashion blogs can be very narrow but deep in their focus. One example of this is denimnews (denimnews.blogspot.com) that chronicles the denim industry in impressive detail. Posts include information on lawsuits such as Levi's trademark litigation, the financial performance of various denim

companies (one post notified that Joe's Jeans was back on the Nasdaq exchange after being delisted) as well as pictures and reviews about specialty denim and information about high-end denim retailers (Marsh, 2006). Blogs dedicated to specific accessories such as handbags are common. It seems that for any niche of the fashion industry, a blog exists to chronicle it.

Purpose and respondent profiles

The purpose of this research project was to conduct qualitative e-mail interviews with the authors of three of the most popular fashion blogs, Manolo of *Manolo's Shoe Blog*, the 'Fug Girls' Heather and Jessica of *Go Fug Yourself*, also referred to as GFY and Barney's Girl and Harrod's Girl of *IamFashion*, to learn about their feelings about their blogs, their impact and their opinions of how blogging has impacted traditional fashion journalism. Research questions were composed after an extensive literature review about fashion blogs and the same questions were asked of all three respondents.

Founded in October 2004, *Manolo's Shoe Blog* (<http://shoeblogs.com/>) attracts an average of 7,000 daily visitors and reportedly has a blog income of six figures thanks to a mix of contextual ads, blog ads, affiliate sales of shoes and from his own line of merchandise including t-shirts and coffee mugs adorned with witticisms written in his own unique style (Dodes, 2006; Elphistone, 2006). Technorati ranks his blog as the number four fashion blogs with 2,216 links from 1,002 sites (Weil, Corcoran & Moir, 2006). He also writes an e-mail newsletter that is mailed out to his 'internet friends' including fashion advice, news and information on special deals. Manolo, a New Yorker who writes under a pseudonym that is an homage to his hero, Manolo Blahnik, received the ultimate compliment when Manolo Blahnik stated, "Manolo the Shoeblogger? Sorry, not me. But it's very funny, isn't it? Hilarious!" (Manolo's Shoe Blog, 2006).

Heather and Jessica, commonly known as 'The Fug Girls', began their blog *Go Fug Yourself* (<http://gofugyourself.typepad.com/>) in 2004 originally as an inside joke between friends about 'fug' (a contraction of the words fantastically ugly) outfits worn by celebrities, the site now receives anywhere from 130,000 to 150,000 hits per day, and reportedly earns about \$3500 per month in advertising (Brook and Pacio, 2006). Using a formula that measures size by how often a blog is mentioned by

other blogs, Technorati.com rates their site at number 83 on its list of the 100 biggest blogs and the number one fashion blog, with 7,393 links from 4,547 sites (Barnes, 2005; Weil, Corcoran & Moir, 2006). Based purely on traffic, another tracking site called Truth Laid Bear ranks them as the number six most visited blog (Barnes, 2005). Their blog has been mentioned in many print publications, including *Entertainment Weekly*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harpers Bazaar* and *Elle*, and the subject of stories in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Daily News*. The 'Fug Girls' reach has grown to include television appearances and writing reviews of fashion week in New York for *New York Magazine's* website.

IamFashion (<http://www.iamfashion.blogspot.com>) was created in 2004 by Barney's Girl and Harrod's Girl. The name is derived from a quote by Coco Chanel: "I don't do fashion, I am fashion" Inspired to create a site "...that was made for normal people by normal people," the two are college students who blog from The University of Chicago and the London School of Economics (*IamFashion*, 2007). Their blogging activities have extended to contributing to *JANE* magazine's online blog, and they have been featured in articles in the *International Herald Tribune* and MSNBC.com (Tibbetts, 2006). Technorati ranks them as number 7 of its top ten most popular fashion blogs (Weil, Corcoran & Moir, 2006).

Credentials

One of the main reasons that blogs are cited as such a democratizing force in fashion coverage is the lack of credentials necessary in order to keep a blog. While many bloggers are employed in some facet of the fashion industry in some way, just as many are not, and even fewer still have any professional journalism or writing training. This outsider status endears them to their readers. When asked about what they perceive as their credentials, the bloggers were upfront about not having any formal background and all were in agreement that credentials were irrelevant to what they do:

From *IamFashion*:

We have absolutely no credentials; we just really enjoy fashion. We don't know what constitutes as a good blogger, but you do have to be determined to update frequently and have some sense of style! Also it's only fun if the blogger is similar to the audience the blog aims for. Eg.

We're college students, so our blog is pretty much suitable for young, down-to-earth readers who just enjoy fashion the same way we do.

From Jessica and Heather of the Fug Girls:

[Jessica] I don't know that credentials, per se are required for the sort of blog we write, because it's basically simply our personal opinions, and for that, the only credentials I feel like I really need are my own eyes.

[Heather] Exactly. I don't think your resume makes you a good blogger – it comes down to whether you have a point of view and you can express it in a way that is attractive to people. Sure, if you're not a parent, don't write a parenting blog. But for the type of humor we write, I don't think people care what our backgrounds are, as long as they enjoy agreeing or disagreeing with us (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

From Manolo:

The only credential the Manolo has, or needs, is that he loves the shoes.

The Manolo is the critic and, to some of the extent, the entertainer. He is not blogging about the matters of the national security, nor the genome sequencing, he is blogging about the fashion, and the art, and the pop culture, and thus all that is required of him is the good eye and the keen sense of style and ability to express himself well in the written word. For the most part, that is all that is required of any fashion blogger.

Independence

Despite the abundance of media coverage, fashion journalism has evolved in such a way that runway reviews take on more of a promotional, rather than a critical slant. "I believe there's very little fashion journalism. There's plenty of coverage of fashion shows, models, product launches, trends and celebrities, but there are few publications that apply journalistic standards of fairness and accountability to the coverage of the fashion industry." (Givhan, in Lee, 2003, p.97). There are several contributing factors to this phenomenon. One factor is the common practice of fashion designers giving free gifts to magazine editors. While it may not be outright bribery, there is the potential for an editor to feel compelled to promote a product they received for free from a designer. A more significant financial incentive is advertising revenue. In the 1990s, designers such as Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger bypassed the need for editorial coverage by taking out multi-page advertisements (Agins, 2001) and magazines became beholden to the income generated by their

large advertisers. It is not uncommon for editors to promote the work of their major advertisers in their own editorial spreads, and to avoid offending them by making negative comments about their work. Finally, access to a designer's show may be jeopardized if a bad review angers the designer and results in an editor being blacklisted from the next season's guest list in retaliation (Lee, 2003).

One of the key elements that readers tend to expect from blogs is the writers' honest opinions about what they think about runway shoes and current trends. Blogs are highly regarded by young readers who are from a generation that shuns mainstream magazines and the corporate world (La Ferla, 2005). Unlike traditional media outlets that rely on advertising revenue for funding, fashion blogs do not have to be concerned with retribution in the event they offend a particular designer or brand.

From Heather of the Fug Girls:

I don't think anyone wonders if there's more to the story than what we're posting. Not that I'm trying to cast aspersions on magazines; it's just that we don't ever need to circulate with any of these people, or have them host any of our events or pose for a cover, so people know that we have no reason to pull any punches (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

From Manolo:

As for the content, the Manolo is free to be as ridiculous, or as funny, or as obtuse, or as erudite as he wishes, without having to worry about the lowest common denominator of the mass market, or the ire of his advertisers.

Obviously this means that the fashion blogs can be much more personal and eccentric than the magazines, which must, for economic reasons, continually worry about the size of their audience and the displeasure of their advertisers (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

Some members of the fashion community don't feel that fashion criticism should be a part of media coverage anyway. "To be honest, fashion really isn't important enough of a subject to warrant deep, objective analysis. More important is to report on the collections editors like and then pretty much ignore the rest – if a designer had a bad season, the lack of good pres will encourage him or her to do a better job." (Harder, in Lee, 2003, p. 98). The bloggers interviewed for this research had mixed reactions to this sentiment, although they all were in agreement that fashion was ultimately fun.

From Manolo

Everything merits the deep, objective analysis, from the most ephemeral piece of the pop culture to the reason why the Converse Chucks are so wildly popular among the annoying faux hipster graduate students.

Happily, it is not the place of the Manolo to provide such deep analysis, which is the good thing because often the Manolo is like the Freud, believing that sometimes the cigarette leg jeans are just the cigarette leg jeans (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

From IamFashion:

At the end of the day, fashion is an art form and a business. In these two perspectives, it merits analysis. Designing beautiful clothes, esp clothes like haute couture, it is no different from expensive paintings and architecture. It's our opinion that it's not right to think fashion is merely a frivolous thing vain people enjoy. Fashion affects the daily aspects of many people, whether they realize or not, and it also supports many people's living (by employing them). But of course, in normal daily life, one really doesn't have to take fashion or things like 'does this shirt look cute on me?' too seriously (personal communication, February 13, 2007)!

Anonymity

For decades, many of fashion's top magazine editors have been nearly as famous as the designers they cover. Carmel Snow is still regarded as perhaps the greatest fashion editor of all time for her work at *Harper's Bazaar* from 1932-1957, while Grace Mirabella is still remembered for her 17 years at *Vogue*. Both of these women were considered celebrities in their day, and current fashion editors are no exception. Andre Leon Tally published his memoir in 2003. Grace Coddington of British and American *Vogue* has a retrospective of 30 years at *Vogue*. Anna Wintour is so recognizable she was parodied in the opening scene of the fashion comedy *Zoolander*, and is the subject of an unauthorized biography, *Front Row*. Nina Garcia, *Elle* magazine's fashion editor, is instantly recognizable to fans of the television reality show, *Project Runway*, in which she is a judge.

Unlike the high profile kept by fashion magazine editors, anonymity is common among fashion bloggers. Most blog under a pseudonym, such as Barney's Girl and Harrod's Girl at *IamFashion*, or give just part of their real names, such as Heather and Jessica at *Go Fug Yourself*.

Unlike famous fashion editors who are as recognizable as the designers they cover, most fashion bloggers also do not post pictures of themselves. A look at the *Go Fug Yourself* blog shows pictures of the actresses Joan Collins and Shannen Doherty instead of actual pictures of the authors, and the most Manolo's fans have ever seen of their hero is a picture of his beautifully-shod foot. When asked, the bloggers shared their reasons for keeping such a low profile:

From Manolo:

There are many reasons for the Manolo's reluctance to reveal more about himself, perhaps mostly because the everyday details of the Monolo's life are so terribly mundane, and also perhaps because the Manolo does not wish to court fame, nor believes that fame, as it is understood today, is necessarily the good thing. (Although the Manolo would never go so far as to suggest he is anything more than the very minor internet quasi-celebrity, known to the few thousand peoples at best.) (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

From IamFashion:

As much as we admire her, we've never really thought of ourselves in comparison with Anna Wintour. We've simply chose to remain relatively anonymous because it was fun that way.. Besides, a touch of mystery never hurts :) (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

Anonymity, however is something that appears to be sacrificed as more fashion bloggers become considered as celebrities and fashion authorities themselves. News articles about bloggers have begun to reveal their names and information about their personal lives. In an article in the *International Herald Tribune* Harrod's Girl was revealed to be Rebecca Fok, a 19-year-old who was raised in Hong Kong and currently lives in London, and her partner Barney's Girl as Vincci Nie, an 18-year-old who lives in Chicago. Although the profile on their website mentioned that they were college students in London and Chicago, their real names are still not on the site. Similarly, as the *Go Fug Yourself* girls' profile has risen in the media, their privacy has begun to erode. A *Wall Street Journal* article on the bloggers revealed their last names (Jessica Morgan and Heather Cocks), their ages (30 and 28 respectively at the time the article was written) and their day jobs (in reality television) (Barnes, 2005). Their images are becoming more familiar to fashion followers as well. As a part of their coverage of Fashion Week for *New York Magazine*, the girls' caricatures were

featured as a part of their blog. They've also revealed themselves on television as commentators for the VH1 show, "Awesomely Bad Fashion" and on the TV Guide channel commenting on actors' SAG (Screen Actors Guild) Awards fashion choices. But this loss of anonymity does not bother the Fug Girls.

From Jessica of the Fug Girls:

Actually, in the beginning, we didn't really think we were being anonymous. Because GFY was intended primarily for our own amusement and the amusement of our friends, everyone we thought would ever read it already knew who we were. We posted phony "about the author" information because we thought it was funny, and we've left it up for that reason, as well as because we don't think people really come to GFY because they think we personally are all that interesting (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

The mainstream press takes up blogging...

Although some critics downplay the popularity of blogs, saying that they are only "...a small, niche target market and are not a true representation of the entire fashion industry," (Armstrong, quoted in Brook & Pacio, 2006, p. 3), it is clear that some traditional print media sources have recognized their importance and have begun supplementing their printed reviews with blog entries. *The New York Times* Fashion Critic Cathy Horyn began her blog 'On the Runway' on January 25, 2007. The difference between her online content and her print editorial content is striking. Her blog is far more relaxed and takes more risks than her columns. For example, on her January 26th post, she addressed the reader directly when she wrote, "From time to time on this blog, I'd like to show you how something is done, in the hopes of better explaining the creative process," when discussing an Alber Elbaz show for Lanvin. Even the entry title was laid-back: "HOWJADODAT?" (Horyn, 2007). Also unlike the newspaper, Horyn's blog is also extremely personal. For example, consider this entry that has little to do with the events on the runway:

I was sitting this morning at Michael Kors' show (luxe babe, chic glen plaid and wondering about my hair. I've been wearing a black knit cap all week. I know what everyone's thinking. "When is she going to take that stupid hat off?" But it's almost too late, at this stage, to take it off, and I don't have time to get to the hairdressers. I was thinking I could get a wig (Horyn, 2007).

It is humorous to try and imagine these random musings ending up on a page in the *Times*. While it might be expected for a general-interest newspaper such as the *Times* to add a blog to its regular fashion coverage, even newspapers that are not as readily associated with fashion have added fashion blogs to their online content.

On February 7, 2007, the *Wall Street Journal Online* launched 'Heard on the Runway' which was featured free on the newspaper's website (www.wsj.com/runway) featuring reports on fashion shows and industry news from the experienced Wall Street reporters such as Teri Agins ("Fashion blog launched...", 2007).

As bloggers branch out to traditional forms of media

Having caught on to their sizeable fanbase and highly devoted readership of their blogs, producers of traditional media have begun to approach bloggers about branching out into other forms of media. The Fug Girls have sold a book to Simon and Schuster, and Manolo has an editor and is currently showing a manuscript to publishing houses. The bloggers that are pursuing such deals state that they are a result of opportunity as opposed to a deliberate attempt to broaden their fan base.

From Heather of the Fug Girls:

We both love to write, and we love to talk. So we've splashed out into these other areas because the opportunities presented themselves, and they're all things that we like to do. It's not any more calculated than that, really. Maybe it should be, but we are firm believers in just riding the tide. Not that we eschew a masterplan completely, but we don't really want a specific roadmap – too many good things have happened to us just from trusting our instincts and following what's fun and makes us happy (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

The future of blogging

Blogging's outsider status is rapidly changing as the fashion industry becomes more aware of their influence. Formerly limited to looking up designer collections on websites such as style.com as the source of their commentary, for Fall 2006 some 40 bloggers were granted passes from IMG, the company that oversees fashion week in New York, and of those bloggers, some were invited to as many as 20 runway shows (Dodes, 2006). As more corporations come to embrace blogs, such as designer Jill Stuart, who as an employee dedicated to tracking blogs and their impact on sales (Dodes, 2006) or Keds Corp, where the

marketing team track blogs in order to understand potential consumers (Elphinstone, 2006) will blogs lose their sense of authenticity with the readers who embrace them for their independence? The bloggers interviewed for this research were not concerned about this happening.

From Heather of the Fug Girls

Some might, some might not. Just as some magazines might promote their advertisers more heavily and some might not. It's a risk in any kind of situation with anyone, not just with bloggers. And I don't think it's fair to assume that all bloggers are standing outside the window just waiting to be let inside, and that once they're in, they'll abandon who they are. People as people are susceptible to temptations but they don't all give into them, and bloggers are no different than any other reporter (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

From Manolo:

No, the Monolo does not worry about the supposedly corrupting influence of the "big" money and the adulation. To the greatest extent the Manolo believes that this problem of authenticity is self-regulating, that because the cost of starting the new blog is essentially nil, there will always be the young, fresh and authentic voices who will stand ready to criticize those who have lost their way amid the money and the recognition.

Yes, there will be those bloggers who "take the Boeing" to use the Instapundit's metaphor for the selling out, but the audience for the blogs (which is incredibly sophisticated) will judge those who have crossed the line in this respect, and the new and more "authentic" bloggers will eventually rise to take their place (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

As blogging moves across the fashion cycle from innovators and early adopters as both bloggers and readers to mass acceptance, it will be interesting to watch how the medium as a whole evolves. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that blogging has permanently joined print and television media as a valid and accepted form of fashion journalism.

References

Agins, T. (2001), *The end of fashion: How marketing changed the clothing business forever* (New York: Quill)

Barnes, B. (2005, September 28), 'Fashion trash talk is a big blog hit for the 'Fug Girls'; Savoring the frightfully ugly, they savage celebrities; Paris Hilton's 'accident'. *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition), p.A1

Brook, L. & Pacio, N. (2006, November 20), 'Trash talk', *The Courier Mail (Australia)*, p. 39. Retrieved February 11, 2007 from: LexisNexis Academic database.

Cocks, H. & Morgan, J. (personal communication, February 14, 2007).

Cocks, H. & Morgan, J. (2007), *Go fug yourself* [web site]. Available: <http://gofugyourself.typepad.com/> Accessed 25/7/07

Corcoran, C.T. (2006, February 6), The blogs that took over the tents. *WWD*, p. 30. Retrieved January 22, 2007 from: InfoTrac OneFile database

Dodes, R. (2006, September 12), 'Bloggers get under the tend; Fashion once dismissed them as snarky and small-time, but now they're getting respect', *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition), p. B1

Elphinstone, J.W. (2006, January 30), 'Psst. That's so '05'; Blogging is fast evolving from online hobby to everyday cultural habit. But for footwear vendors, is the raw form of communication a marketing dream or reputation wrecker? *Footwear News*, p. 42. Retrieved January 22, 2007 from: InfoTrac OneFile database

Fashion blog launched by The Wall Street Journal Online. (2007, February 8), *Internet Business News*, p. NA. Retrieved February 11, 2007 from: InfoTrac OneFile database

Fok, R. & Nie, V. (personal communication, February 13, 2007)

Fok, R. & Nie, V. (2007), *IamFashion* [web site]. Available: <http://iamfashion.blogspot.com/>

Horyn, C. (2007, January 26), HOWJADODAT? [Online blog]. *The New York Times Online* Retrieved February 12, 2007 from: <http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Horyn, C. (2007, February 7), 'The incredible allure of it all', [Online blog]. *The New York Times Online* Retrieved February 12, 2007 from: <http://runway.blogs.nytimes.com/>

Karimzadeh, M., Carmon, I., & Corcoran, C. (2006), 'Fashion's media explosion', *WWD* **192** (123), pp. 10-11. Retrieved Sunday, February 11, 2007 from: Business Source Complete database

Kay, K. (2007, January 15), 'The fashion blog stars', *The Daily Mail* [online] Retrieved January 16, 2007 from: www.dailymail.co.uk.

La Ferla, R. (2005, September 13), 'Fashion's sassy bloggers', *International Herald Tribune* Retrieved January 22, 2007 from: www.iht.com

Lee, M.K. (2003), *Fashion victim* (New York: Broadway Books)

Marsh, E. (2006, March 16), 'Blogging the blues', *WWD* p.9. Retrieved February 11 from: InfoTrac OneFile database

Manolo the Shoeblogger (personal communication, February 13, 2007).

Manolo the Shoeblogger (2007), *Manolo's shoe blog* [web site]. Available: <http://shoeblogs.com/> Accessed 25/6/07

Tibbets, T. (2006, November 16), 'Students blogging in style', *Current Magazine* Retrieved January 22, 2007 from: MSNBC.com.

Weil, J., Corcoran, C. & Moir, J. (2006), 'In their sites', *WWD* 191 (137), pp. 62-63 Retrieved Sunday, February 11, 2007 from: Business Source Complete Database.

About The Author

Lorynn Divita is an Assistant Professor of Fashion Merchandising in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Her research interests include corporate competitiveness, business ethics and the environmental impact of the textile and apparel industry.

Lorynn_Divita@baylor.edu

Lorynn Divita, Ph.D.
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97346
Waco, TX 76798-7346
USA