

“They're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs”: Conceptions of Authenticity in Fashion Blogging

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Abstract

Fashion blogging is an international subculture comprised primarily of young women who post photographs of themselves and their possessions, comment on clothes and fashion, and use self-branding techniques to promote themselves and their blogs. Drawing from ethnographic interviews with 30 participants, I examine how fashion bloggers use “authenticity” as an organizing principle to differentiate “good” fashion blogs from “bad” fashion blogs. “Authenticity” is positioned as an invaluable, yet ineffable quality which differentiates fashion blogging from its mainstream media counterparts, like fashion magazines and runway shows, in two ways. First, authenticity describes a set of affective relations between bloggers and their readers. Second, despite previous studies which have positioned “authenticity” as antithetical to branding and commodification, fashion bloggers see authenticity and commercial interests as potentially, but not necessarily, consistent. This study adds to the growing literature on online self-presentation techniques which finds that the entrepreneurial self-concept encouraged in professional blogging communities is intimately linked to a larger shift in cultural labor to capitalist business practice.

Introduction

A fashion blog is a blog about fashion, but the term is generally used to refer to “personal style blogs,” in which people post photographs of themselves posing in different outfits. Fashion blogging has grown considerably in the last few years. The Independent Fashion Bloggers coalition lists more than 48,000 members, up from 3,000 in 2011 (Coveted Media LLC 2012). As the readership of fashion blogs has grown, so have their influence. The most famous

fashion bloggers, such as Leandra Medine of *The Man Repeller* and Tavi Gevinson of *Style Rookie*, are courted by designers and receive invitations to fashion shows, free clothes, and opportunities to collaborate with fashion brands. Magazines like *Lucky* and *Elle* feature fashion spreads inspired by and starring fashion bloggers. The bloggers behind *The Sartorialist*, *What I Wore*, and *Facehunter* have published books of their photographs and commentary. As the benefits accruing to successful fashion bloggers mount, more women—fashion bloggers are overwhelmingly female—are starting fashion blogs. There are fashion bloggers in virtually every city in the United States, and fashion bloggers hold meetups and “tweet ups” in cities around the world.

Fashion bloggers and their readers often consider blogs to be more authentic, individualistic, and independent than the traditional fashion media. The fashion blogosphere is portrayed in the media as a democratic space where women who do not fit into the fashion mold—rich, thin, tall, heterosexual, and white—can enjoy the creativity and self-expression of clothes, accessories, and beauty (Khamis & Munt 2010). Subsets of fashion bloggers, such as fat empowerment fashion bloggers and modest fashion bloggers, trade information, post pictures, and create visual and consumerist landscapes for populations ignored by *Vogue* or Style.com. This rhetoric holds that fashion blogging opens up spaces for “democratic” engagement with clothing and fashion in a way antithetical to the rigorously patrolled fashion world. However, as Minh-ha Pham points out, this “tendency to invest new technologies with revolutionary potential obscures and sometimes entirely misses the ways” in which fashion blogs are firmly contextualized within a striated capitalist framework. As such, blogs may often reinforce “classed hierarchies of aesthetics, tastes, and knowledge” (2009). Indeed, in Sarah

Banet-Weiser's book *Authenticity*, she explores the ways in which the active, agented presentation of the self online, especially for young women, takes place within a "commercial context of branding and advertising" that can "contain and limit young women" (2012:66).

In this paper I use the oft-expressed ideal of *authenticity* as a jumping-off point to discuss the contradictions (or lack thereof) between the decidedly commercial spaces of fashion blogging, where branding, marketing, and advertising often shapes expression, and the emphasis on democracy and "realness" self-professed by bloggers and readers. I find that *authenticity* means three things to women engaged with fashion blogs: first, a palpable sense of truthful self-expression; second, a connection with and responsiveness to the audience; and third, an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands. Thus, the authentic is not something that exists apart from commercial culture, but a set of affective relations between individuals, audiences, and commodities. While the emphasis on fashion/beauty goods is somewhat specific to this community, *authenticity* as a boundary strategy between selfhood and neoliberal capitalism is a common feature of entrepreneurial online communities, such as self-branders, camgirls, and lifecasters.

Literature Review

Authenticity

The question of authenticity has concerned many modern philosophers and theorists: namely, the distinction between what something is and what it appears to be (Potter 2010). Charles Lowney writes that authenticity emerges with the individual, autonomous Enlightenment subject, namely, how one expresses his or her true self as an agented actor, while fully enmeshed in society, with its intrinsic layers of role play and performance. Sartre, for instance, offers the ultimate example of inauthenticity: a waiter who "fully identifies with his role as a waiter" (in Lowney, 34). Similarly, Walter Benjamin's famous *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* concerns itself with the difference between an object and its mimesis. In a time where original objects d'art are easily duplicated, what distinguishes the object from its replica? Benjamin argues that the original possesses an unmistakable *aura* (1968). These theories share a sense that the authentic is something real, something true, something moral, some thing apart from the crass, commercial, social world.

In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Lionel Trilling investigated the modern obsession with authenticity, which he argues to be a central concept of contemporary moral life. Trilling distinguishes authenticity from sincerity, conceptualizing authenticity as a display of the hidden

inner life, complete with passions and anguish, while sincerity is the opposite of hypocrisy—honesty without pretense. He notes that our cultural shift from sincerity to authenticity may be tied to the emergence of the modern and the diminishing of traditional ties and social hierarchies.

While authenticity as a moral imperative to be "true to oneself" is highly valued, cultural theorists have noted that achieving it is ultimately impossible, as it is a social construct that is always relative and context-dependent (Grazian 2003). As Andrew Potter relates:

Authenticity is a way of talking about things in the world, a way of making judgments, staking claims, and expressing preferences about our relationships to one another, to the world, and to things. But those judgments, claims, or preferences don't pick out real properties in the world (2010, 13).

Nevertheless, authenticity continues to have considerable cultural value. Both Banet-Weiser and Potter point out that "authenticity" often indicates a non- or pre-commercialized space, as in an authentic DJ or street artist who is co-opted by a sneaker company for commercial use, or an authentic Flamenco dance rather than one arranged for tourists. The authentic is positioned in contradistinction to crass excesses of commercial capitalism, such as fast food or advertising.

However, modern understandings of the authentic also speak deeply to cultural theories of people using consumer goods to symbolize or mark identity and affiliation (Featherstone 1991). Being authentically punk, for instance, may include purchasing old vinyl records or bondage pants. Being authentically spiritual could include attending yoga classes and doing a juice cleanse. Thus, it is not that authenticity and capitalism are mutually exclusive, but that capitalist practices should be engaged in mindfully (Heath & Potter 2004).

Recently, scholars have documented a plethora of self-presentation techniques, such as self-branding and micro-celebrity, which incorporate branding and advertising practices (Hearn 2008; Senft 2008). These are particularly relevant online, where the ideal agented subject is the active *entrepreneur* (Marwick, 2013). One might expect that authenticity is less salient in spaces where individuals are expected to promote themselves for status and attention, from pop star Justin Bieber to tech pundits like Michael Arrington. However, even in online environments saturated with celebrity culture and marketing rhetoric, authenticity has a significant presence (Marwick & boyd 2011). In these spaces, authenticity becomes a way for individuals to differentiate themselves, not only from each other but from other forms of media.

Fashion Blogging

Susan Herring et. al. argue that women's online content, such as online journals or diaries, is systemically devalued compared to that of men (2004). While there is an enormous body of literature on blogging, it primarily focuses on political blogs, which are dominated by men (for example, Adamic & Glance 2005; Hindman 2008). While fully fifty percent of blogs are "culture" blogs predominantly maintained by women, such as parenting blogs, food blogs, and fashion blogs, they remain understudied and are typically denigrated as shallow or silly (Pham 2011).

Certain feminist scholars have framed fashion blogging as a space where young women can experiment with feminine identities. Tara Chittenden's qualitative study of ten teenage female bloggers examined identity construction using fashion (2010). She concluded that fashion blogs can serve as playful spaces for teenage girls trying out impression management and self-expression through clothing. Malin Sveningsson Elm similarly found that Swedish teenage girls used the community Lunarstorm to inhabit different styles, negotiating complex feminine roles and self-presentation strategies (2009). These girls portrayed themselves as stylish, sexually available, yet modest, both furthering and resisting normative expressions of femininity. Both scholars conceptualize fashion blogs as a place where young women can safely test out different expressions of self and gender.

More critical work on fashion blogging is provided by Minh-ha Pham (2011), who evaluates the discourse of "democracy" that surrounds fashion blogging. Pham recognizes that the technologically determinist fantasies of democratic, participatory blogging are deeply flawed. Yet she admits that "the fashion blogger is the agent (and object) of her own representation. In this way, the digital representations of Asian femininity constructed and circulating in and through these blogs differ from hegemonic and externally produced representations of Asian women and Asian femininity" (10). Although the liberating potential of fashion blogs is circumscribed by their existence within specific configurations of labor, race, and representation, Asian/Asian-American bloggers are able to use the fashion blog to present alternative or oppositional narratives. For instance, a series of self-portraits by blogger Meggy Wang of *Fashion for Writers* emulate the glamorous, 1940s Asian-American starlet. These photographs figuratively center the experiences of women of color who are often written out of fashion history, and draw attention to the absence of Asian-Americans from the typical narrative of mid-century style. Pham concludes that despite its limitations, "the fashion blogosphere is nevertheless a significant cultural site in which the struggle over the meanings of race, gender,

sexuality, and political action happen every day" (28). Pham's paper both reinforces the limits of digital exceptionalism, and acknowledges the potentially resistive spaces that fashion blogs can make possible.

Perhaps most relevant to this paper is Agnès Rocamora's textual analysis of fashion blogs, which explores their differences from mainstream fashion media, most notably in "decentering" coverage of fashion from the global capitals of London, Paris, and Tokyo. She points out that fashion blogs are, in many ways, a *remediation* of fashion magazines. Bloggers often emulate tropes and themes of fashion photography, and illustrate their posts with visuals borrowed from magazines and advertising campaigns. As echoed in discourses of authenticity, fashion blogs are overwhelmingly positioned as more "real" than mainstream magazines. This image of "fashion as it is, unmediated" is amplified by bloggers' use of casual, immediate language, and the prevalence of "street fashion" photography which purports to show fashion worn by "real people" (2012, p. 102).

Despite the popularity of fashion blogging, there are few ethnographic studies focused on the experiences of fashion bloggers beyond small groups of teenagers. This paper attempts to critically evaluate the dichotomy of commercialism and authenticity in fashion blogging by examining how fashion bloggers conceptualize and evaluate the "realness" of themselves and others.

Method

Given that authenticity has tremendous import not only culturally, but as a point of differentiation between user-generated content and that created by mainstream media, how is this experienced by fashion bloggers? How do we reconcile the continued sociocultural emphasis on authenticity with the decidedly commercial context of many online environments? This paper uses an ethnographic, interpretive approach to examine fashion blogging as a case study of an online community centered around the use and display of commodity goods, namely fashion and beauty products. The research questions for this paper are as follows:

RQ1: What do fashion bloggers consider to be "authentic"?

RQ2: How do fashion bloggers reconcile authenticity and commerciality?

The data for this paper comes from two sources. First, I conducted interviews with 30 fashion bloggers from four US cities: Nashville, Raleigh/Durham, Washington DC, and Boston. Bloggers were found through search engines, links on blogrolls of other bloggers, directories on sites like IFB (Independent Fashion Bloggers) and Chictopia, and referrals from other bloggers. Each interview took place in

person and took from 45 minutes to two hours. The interviews were semi-structured and all bloggers filled out an identical questionnaire. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using an emergent coding scheme in Atlas.ti. I also attended events such as meet-ups and clothing swaps with fashion bloggers in the Boston area, and took field notes on these excursions. All bloggers interviewed for this project were female, and ranged in age from 15 to mid-50s.

Second, authenticity came up during my interview with Katy Rose, the proprietor of the blog *Modly Chic*. She was intrigued by the concept and posted a five-question survey about authenticity as part of her “Fashion Beauty Friend Friday,” a writing prompt posted weekly on her blog (I did not initiate or request this, and only found out about it when visiting her blog). 57 bloggers answered her survey on their blogs, and their responses were collected and coded. While not all bloggers revealed their identity, age or location, those who did were female, ranged in age from 15 to early 60s, and were situated primarily in the United States (other countries included Australia, the Ukraine, Costa Rica, and the UK).

Authenticity in Fashion Blogging

Every fashion blogger involved in this project read other women’s fashion blogs. Thus, when I asked them about blogging, they reflected on their own practices and simultaneously evaluated those of their peers. Authenticity came up frequently in interviews, whether as something bloggers strived for in their own blogging, as something that differentiates a “good” fashion blog from a “bad” one, or as a quality that distinguishes fashion blogs from mainstream fashion media like magazines. Julie of *Orchid Grey* said, “I love magazines but I really love reading blogs because it’s coming from a specific person, it’s someone’s unadulterated point of view from their world.” Lisa Rowen of *Quarter Life* explained, “A good fashion blog definitely talks about a whole person.” When asked to explain authenticity for *Fashion Beauty Friends Friday*, all 57 respondents agreed on its importance. Defining it could be difficult; Colleen of *Scrap and Run* said, “I really don’t even think I can describe it. I think by reading a blog you can tell if that’s the person or if that’s the person they are pretending to be. I can’t describe it at all though.”

While individual definitions and discussions of authenticity varied among bloggers, three themes emerged. First, an authentic blogger is one who reveals something about her true inner self. Second, as a “real person,” she extends her honesty and transparency to the relationships with her readers. And finally, an authentic fashion blogger expresses her personal style regardless of trends, sponsors, or free branded goods.

Truthful Self-Expression

Lionel Trilling’s definition of authenticity as passion and interiority is crucial to fashion blogging’s appeal. In this case, readers expect to learn something about the inner life of the blogger through their perusal of their blog. *The Put Together Girl* wrote, “How I determine whether a blog is authentic or not, is whether or not I’d like to be friends with you in real life. Could I grab a cup of coffee with you? Could I go shopping with you? I think the key question I ask is do you let me enough into your life that I see that you’re a person with high points and low points, good days and bad?” Many bloggers pointed to the glimpses into people’s lives as what kept them interested in reading blogs for long periods of time. Allie from *Wardrobe Oxygen* told me:

I think the blogs that really last and will last through everything are the ones where you know the person. So if they do gain weight, or if they have a kid, or if they lose their job and they can't afford their designer clothes any more. You still love them because you know them as a person.

By honestly revealing personal information, bloggers increase the likelihood that their readers will form a personal relationship with them. Hope from *Like Unexpected Sunshine* said, “even though I don’t know them in real life, I feel like I know who they truly are through their blogging.” When asked to name an authentic blogger, Liz of *26 and Counting* named the popular Kendi Everyday: “She seems like a real friend. She’s relatable. I’m interested in her blog, outside of what she wears.”

Since these affective ties between blogger and reader are established through reading, many respondents referred to the authorial voice of the blogger as a key element in authenticity. For example, Brett, when asked how she infuses her blog with an authentic feeling, responded, “I pretty much write exactly how I speak. If I was having a conversation with you in person, I would sound exactly the same way I write.” If a blogger demonstrated a disconnect between her “blog voice” and her voice in other platforms, this indicated inauthenticity. Suze of *Miss Vinyl Ahoy* said, “[The blogger’s] voice, the topics they talk about and the general feeling on their blog (and facebook, twitter, etc) should be true to themselves and the same on all platforms. [I unfollowed a blog that has] nice outfits, but the blogger’s voice on the blog doesn’t match their twitter account AT ALL. They’re so nice on their blog, but rude and mean on their twitter. DISLIKE!” Thus, not only did an “honest” authorial voice matter, but it had to be consistent over time, across social media and even in person.

The nature of the outfits posted on the blog also indicated truthfulness. Several bloggers expressed dislike of the extreme outfits demonstrated on the popular luxury

fashion blogs. SilverGirl wrote, “If the person dresses over-the-top all the time. I get the feeling they are just playing dress-up and not living in what they are posting as their daily wear.” Similarly, Lori of *No More Sweatpants* wrote, “I find it hard to read or even know people where everything seems perfect all the time. I’m kind of like, “What’s really going on that you have to put up this farce?” Real life isn’t perfect all the time. We are humans after all.” Multiple bloggers pointed out that they read fashion magazines to look at clothes they couldn’t afford; they were more interested in seeing “average women” put together fashionable outfits on limited budgets. Gina of *Inter Alia* wrote, “I generally follow blogs because I want to see how women dress to live their lives. Magazine editorials are beautiful to look at, but so much of the styling is completely impractical for everyday wear. That’s where blogs come in. Reading about as much of people’s lives as they care to share is a fascinating perk of following blogs.”

This does not necessarily mean that a fashion blogger cannot authentically engage with expensive goods; as Fabianne Jach of *The House in the Clouds* explains, “If someone is a super sharp dresser with the discretionary income one only dreams of it’s not any more authentic of them to try to play it down just appear ‘authentic.’” Instead, it was more about actually photographing outfits that the blogger wore outside the house, rather than sitting home experimenting with outrageous looks just for the blog. *Slices of Life* sniffed, “The outfit you see posted that day, is what I wore that day. So if you read my blog in the morning and run into me at a store later that evening, that is what I will be wearing. I stay true to myself on my blog.” Blog readers considered it more authentic for bloggers to show what they actually wore, rather than a fashionable fantasy.

To many bloggers, authenticity involved *honesty*, whether revealing personal information to create affective ties with readers, maintaining a consistent authorial voice, or photographing themselves in clothes that they “really” wore. Another type of authenticity involved interaction with the audience and the fashion blogger community.

Responsiveness to Audience

Within many online communities, well-known individuals are expected to be available and accountable to their audience (Marwick 2013). This availability frequently contrasted with the distance maintained between readers/individuals and the creators of traditional media content. For instance, while the reader of a *Vogue* magazine editorial cannot voice her opinions to Anna Wintour or Grace Coddington, the reader of a fashion blog is able to tell the blogger exactly what he or she thinks of the latest post. V of *Grit and Glamour* wrote,

Genuine, frequent interactions with readers establishes authenticity better than anything else. When you write back to readers or visit their blogs, you share your voice and perspective even more informally. And readers can see that you actually care, that you are a real human being. That is huge to me. So many of us adore celebs and designers, but because we rarely interact with them on a personal level, sometimes they almost don’t seem real. It’s human interaction that creates connectedness. Without it, we are simply photos on a page. Or worse, talking heads.

In this case, a blogger who does not engage with her readers is considered less “real” than those who do. Because bloggers have the ability to easily connect with their audience, those who choose not to are seen as uncaring. Kirstin Marie said, “I lost interest in a few [blogs] simply because I felt non-existent. I would comment on so many posts, or attempt to contact the blogger in other ways, and receive absolutely no response. This is really discouraging, and makes me think, well, I guess this person feels they do not need me, so I do not need them. It’s really difficult to want to continue something when it is completely one sided.” V’s quote above compares the relationship between bloggers and their readers to that of famous people and their fans. Celebrities cannot be reached, their statements are unverifiable, and so are considered artificial and disconnected from their audience. Fashion bloggers are preferred by many readers over traditional magazines or celebrities precisely because of their availability.

Lack of engagement with the larger fashion blogger community was also mentioned. Katy Rose said, “if a blogger was really interested in what they are doing they would realize that blogging and all social media is about the community that surrounds it.” Since most fashion bloggers valued personal interaction and closeness, a blogger who did not engage with their readers or other fashion bloggers was considered to be at best a snob, and at worst fake or uninterested.

Honest Brand Engagement

Marketers have flocked to fashion bloggers as rich potential generators of “word of mouth” advertising, making readers suspicious that authentic opinions on brands may actually be paid for. While not all fashion bloggers engage with brands—several of the women I interviewed focused on vintage, thrift, or “remixed” fashion which did not involve buying new clothes or following trends—most do, and so virtually all the women I interviewed had established their own ethical standards around brand engagement.

While all bloggers acknowledged the reality of dealing with brands, there was a strong belief that brand

engagement should not overshadow honesty or personal preference. Most of the women I spoke with felt that personal experience was a prerequisite to endorsing a product. Liza of *Style Blueprint* told me, “To be authentic in what you're writing about, it means that you fully support it. You have tried that face cream. And you didn't just read about it, you tried it, you liked it, you support it, you think this is great.” The very successful blogger Julie of *Orchid Grey*, who had several major sponsorships, only accepted advertising from companies she liked and had experience with. While Julie took “courtesy-of” goods from other companies (free merchandise donated to bloggers), she notified them up front that she could, and did, write negative reviews for items she did not like.

If a blogger engaged with brands simply for the money, her integrity and credibility could be compromised. *Wardrobe Oxygen* blogger Ali said, in a discussion of “sellout” bloggers:

You're forgetting that the difference between you and being an actress or somebody like that is that you're putting your name on something. And your readers are taking your word for gospel. They believe you. So, if you're saying that a brand is really fantastic and you don't know anything about it or you don't really like it or it's just because they're paying you, you're losing your credibility and you're selling yourself.

Fashion bloggers compared the authentic brand endorsements in fashion blogging with the overt advertorial in traditional fashion magazines. AlliXT, who wrote a blog focused on second-hand and green fashion, told me:

I stopped reading [certain blogs] altogether because every single outfit was courtesy of, courtesy of, courtesy of... it went from having a little bit of an authentic voice to just being marketing copy...I consume blogging because it's not traditional media, and I feel that I can tune out some of the messages that, if I were watching TV, would just be there in my face constantly.

Elissa of *Dress with Courage* concurred:

The blogs that have lost me as a reader are those that became too concerned with fancy fonts, edited photos and pandering to sponsors. I read blogs because I enjoy a different perspective on everyday life. They encourage me to challenge old ways of thinking and take risks, whether in fashion, femininity, or my relationships. Blogs that become too polished and pandering smack of insincerity to me. [They] seem much more focused on promoting products. If I wanted that, I'd read a fashion magazine.

While many bloggers felt that fashion media promoted trends and products whether they were high-quality or not,

bloggers were expected to be discerning and honestly review items.

While some bloggers considered their blog to be a small business with a potential for revenue generation, many pointed out that an authentic blogger should not be too concerned with self-promotion. *Beautifully Invisible* writes, “Bloggers with truly authentic voices are not focused on selling something. They don't set out to impress their readers. They aren't marketing themselves as ‘the next big blogger.’ Instead, they focus on writing in such a way that is true to who they are as a person.” The temptation to imitate more successful blogs came up frequently. Bloggers bemoaned people who mindlessly imitated others and followed trends; examples included cupcakes, Audrey Hepburn, and the Jeffrey Campbell Lita (a chunky platform bootie). Instead, an authentic blogger should focus on what she likes rather than what she thinks will enable her to become more popular.

Finally, many respondents, most of whom focused on thrift and budget fashion, had an uneasy relationship with the popularity of luxury blogs which showcased designer items. *Third Floor Closet* asked, “Have you ever looked at a blog and thought that what's shown there couldn't be true, that no one lives like this? How does that person live so glamorously [sic] every day? When does she work? How do I know she knows what she's talking about? Is this for real? Is this authentic?!” Many bloggers wanted to know how high-end bloggers were able to afford their expensive, designer clothes. This translated to disclosure of courtesy-of pieces and more mundane questions of economics; *Stumble into Style* wrote, “[Authenticity] is if a blogger is honest with their readers about where the pieces of the outfit came from, how much they spent, if they were gifts/courtesy of a company.”

While nobody expected an authentic blogger to disengage from brands entirely, there were certain boundaries that, once crossed, could lead to inauthenticity. Bloggers established their individual ethics and comfort levels with advertisements, paid reviews, and so forth, and scrutinized the practices of others.

Discussion

The Brand of Self- Expression

While authenticity is highly valued by fashion bloggers, there was no clear consensus on what this means. Authenticity is conceptualized as a somewhat ineffable quality that overlaps with ideals of truthfulness, consistency, and caring. In this sense, the fashion bloggers' sense of authenticity adhered to Trilling's definitions of both sincerity and that of authenticity; honesty was important to readers, but so were the insights into other

women's lives that they garnered from reading their blogs. Of course, it was assumed that these flashes of other lives were honest.

Because fashion bloggers are working from within an extremely commodified sphere—that of fashion, clothing, and beauty, which is fickle and ever-changing by its very nature—it is precisely their sincerity and outspokenness which is valued by readers. The fashion media was viewed by my respondents as a realm of fantasy; reading magazines could be fun and entertaining, but there was widespread recognition that the point of fashion media was to sell products. This presumed that fashion media would be insincere or outright deceitful if they were paid by an advertiser to promote a particular brand. Moreover, for most bloggers, the clothes in fashion magazines were so expensive as to be entirely out of reach. The advice therein was often not applicable to women with non-model figures, women of color, or women with particular concerns such as dressing modestly or shopping primarily at thrift stores—or even women who wanted to dress appropriately for work. Many readers believed that fashion blogs were the best, if not the only, place for them to access useful information that met their needs. Such women enjoyed playing with their personal style and wanted to participate in fashion, but there were no mainstream media outlets that let them do so. As Julie from *Orchid Grey* explained, “People aren't just turning to magazines, and television, and movies, and what's being told to them that's in style, they're really finding it for themselves. And I think that's something that's really different that maybe we haven't seen before.”

Despite the findings of earlier scholars, it was clear that there was no contradiction between being “authentic” and fully engaging in commercial culture. Instead, authenticity described a fluctuating set of affective relations between individuals, audiences, and commodities. An authentic fashion blogger provides personal information about herself to create intimacies between her and her readers, but also to provide a perspective or context for her opinions. Fashion bloggers engaged with brands in a wide variety of ways, from writing critical reviews of beauty products to gushing over runway collections, but it was presumed that their authentic opinions would not and *should not* be tarnished by advertisers.

Fashion bloggers are a fascinating case study for exploring authenticity, due to the central nature of commodity goods to their community. Previous scholarly work has identified authenticity as a boundary strategy between selfhood and neoliberal capitalism in many entrepreneurial online communities, such as self-branders, camgirls, and lifecasters. Authenticity becomes not just an ineffable value, but something that requires consistent labor to achieve. As Katy Rose explained to her father:

When I hesitated to tell my Dad that I was doing it, I realized like, something needed to be done to show that like fashion bloggers aren't just like bimbos... they're a lot more and they're really profound women, they're entrepreneurs. They're like renaissance women, a lot of them.

Fashion bloggers engage in labor, not only to buy clothes, photograph outfits, and so forth, but to create successful online personas while still adhering to the requirements of authenticity and participation. In many ways, they embody the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal capitalism, who works on him or herself, and relies on his or her hard work rather than support from others or the state. In others, they provide a space for discussion of mainstream fashion that is unavailable within the larger commercial culture. While “authenticity” is a buzzword that allows bloggers to differentiate themselves from one another, it also enables women to engage with the pleasures of fashion from somewhat orthogonal spaces, potentially opening up areas for critique. The frank acknowledgement of budget constraints, especially when combined with condemnation of high fashion's unrealities, reveals a push-pull relationship between commodity goods and self-expression. Rather than placing the authentic in a non-existent place entirely outside of commercial culture, or happily and uncritically within it, “authenticity” enables bloggers and readers to recognize the need for boundary work between the pleasure of fashion and the potential pitfalls of self-commodification.

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