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To cite this article: Marco Pedroni (2015) “Stumbling on the Heels of My Blog”: Career, Forms of Capital, and Strategies in the (Sub)Field of Fashion Blogging, Fashion Theory, 19:2, 179-199

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14168357992355>



Published online: 21 Apr 2015.



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“Stumbling on the Heels of My Blog”: Career, Forms of Capital, and Strategies in the (Sub)Field of Fashion Blogging

Marco Pedroni

Marco Pedroni is a Researcher in the Sociology of Culture at the Università e-Campus (Italy), and a member of ModaCult at the Università Cattolica of Milan. He is the author of *Coolhunting* (FrancoAngeli, 2010) and the editor of *From Production to Consumption: The Cultural Industry of Fashion* (Interdisciplinary, 2013).
marco.pedroni@uniecampus.it

Abstract

In this study I examine fashion blogging as a subfield of the field of fashion media by using a Bourdieusian theoretical framework. After identifying the steps of the “career” of bloggers, my aim is to highlight the cultural, economic, and social resources (forms of capital) that bloggers use to access the field, and the strategies they mobilize to shape their relations with other agents within it. The empirical terrain which is investigated to answer these questions is the Italian fashion blogosphere; thirty-four in-depth interviews with (mainly female) fashion bloggers and six with key informants (fashion journalists and website editors) were collected between 2011 and 2014.

Moreover, a more general aim is to question common-sense interpretations (blogs as a revolutionary tool in fashion communication and as a new fashion marketing frontier) to give a normalized picture of fashion blogging as a progressively autonomous social field, governed by its own laws. Through an in-depth analysis of the Italian case this article seeks to stimulate an international discussion over other national fields of blog production.

KEYWORDS: fashion blogging, fashion journalism, forms of capital, social field, fashion media, Pierre Bourdieu

What We Know about Blogs: Three Topics and Two Common-Sense Interpretations

Since their birth in the late 1990s, blogs have introduced radical elements of novelty in communicative relations between broadcaster and audience, showing the potentialities of Web 2.0—a journalistic label introduced by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to describe Internet evolution toward increasing interactivity, social networking, and the culture of sharing (Lindgren 2007). This participatory nature, which lowers entry barriers to publishing a personal point of view for a potentially worldwide audience (Allen 2009: 5), has been welcomed as a communicational revolution, similar to the invention of printing by Gutenberg (Hewitt 2005), due to the capacity of blogging to transfer the power of the media to ordinary citizens (Kline and Burstein 2005).

First appearing in 2001 (see Rosie Findlay's article in this special issue), fashion blogs are now more than ten years old but they still represent some relatively uncharted territory for some fashion journalists and part of the corporate world, and fashion studies only recently started to be interested in the phenomenon.

Due to the importance gained by blogs in the communicational scene, it has become necessary today to consider blogging as a key theme in fashion media research, as well as in more traditional branches such as fashion writing (Barthes 1967; Borrelli 1997; Moeran 2004; Rocamora 2002), photography and fashion images (Jobling 1999; Rabine 1994), gender representation through media (Crewe 2003; Edwards 1997; Gough-Yates 2003; Hermes 1997), and fashion journalism (Conekin and de la Haye 2006; Entwistle and Rocamora 2006; Hahn 2005; Moeran 2006, 2008).

So far, much of the academic literature has focused on three principal issues. First, the relation between fashion blogging and information. In line with enthusiastic Web 2.0 readings, blogs are often the object of celebratory interpretations, due to their democratizing potential. In this way, a street style blog such as *The Sartorialist*, has been described as a "case study in media democracy" (Khamis and Munt 2010: 3) and a

"form of social documentary" encouraging "a dialogue that reinforces fashion of the street as a democratic arena, where the general public, rather than models, celebrities or designers, can be at the forefront of fashion-making" (Berry 2012: 129). Some readings go as far as defining fashion blogging as a countercultural and anti-hegemonic practice, alternative to mainstream fashion and able to oppose the classical trickle-down effect of mainstream power to produce a trickle-up movement (Bandlien 2012).

Are blogs really instruments for the redistribution of symbolic power? Not everybody agrees with this interpretation. Chin and Hills (2008) and Arnold (2012) maintain that the shift of power from traditional media to new media is more rhetorical than substantial, and that blogging actually enforces the dominant positions of the fashion field's insiders, without becoming an effective instrument for the rewriting of hierarchy between "media people" and "ordinary people." Influenced by Tavi Gevinson, Chiara Ferragni, Bryanboy, and other successful bloggers' stories, we may forget that the majority of voices in the blogosphere remain unheard, and that the traditional media exercise their agenda-setting power by popularizing a wide but restricted number of bloggers.

Such a focus on blogs as (apparently revolutionary) informational websites leads us to the so-called "citizen-journalist debate," which wonders essentially about two sub-issues. Does blogging change the laws of the journalistic field? Can bloggers be considered journalists or, at least, knowledge-creators and gatekeepers of information? As to the former question, many opinions are optimistic, and look at bloggers as protagonists of "alternative" (Forde 2001) and "networked" journalism (Russell 2011) more similar to conversation than to dictation, no longer centralized but "profoundly more grass-roots and democratic" (Gillmor 2006: xxiii), and shaped by the creative control of the public (Boyer 2008).

As to the latter, interpretations of blogging as an extension of traditional journalism (Burgess 2006; Gallo 2004) and, in the specific case of fashion, as a "parallel force in fashion media" (Khamis and Munt 2010: 3), do not erase differences between blogger and journalist. Despite their typical journalistic activities, such as fact-checking and reporting, bloggers often work alone and with limited resources, outside an organization where work is normally divided between editorial staff (from editor-in-chief to art directors and stylists) and publishing (or advertising) employees devoted to managerial, advertising, and financial tasks. This distinction, similar to that between culture and the business economy (Moeran 2008: 269), is normally absent from blogs, where an individual often does everything alone, sometimes supported by someone who takes pictures of outfits. Among the cases I analyzed, only one represents an exception.

The comparison with journalism takes us to the second issue: the degree of bloggers' autonomy. Blogs inherited the "Janus-faced structure" (Moeran 2008: 269) of fashion magazines, that is, their twofold

cultural and commercial nature. As happens in fashion magazine based journalism, the relation between blogging and financial support is ambiguous, and recalls the problem of balance between an independent editorial line and the influence of companies that buy (or decide to stop buying) advertising space. Without the supporting network of publishers and editors, bloggers are particularly exposed to the influence of corporate resources and to the loss of editorial independence: through invitations to events and fashion shows, proposals to collaborate with fashion brands to organize giveaways or product promotions, advertising in blogs, the sending of free samples and other economic and social incentives, the fashion blogosphere is exposed to a process of commodification by companies that understand its potential as a “marketing medium” (Pulizzi and Barrett 2009) and eWom instrument (“electronic word of mouth”; see Corcoran 2010; Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004: 39; Kulmala *et al.* 2013).

The third and final branch of studies which I would like to examine is the more explicitly sociological one supported by Agnès Rocamora (2011, 2012; Rocamora and Bartlett 2009), which focuses on the fashion blogosphere as an identitarian and discursive space. Blogs are instruments for identity construction, “new technologies of the Self” (Rocamora 2011: 410), where recent digital devices meet existing tools (e.g. photography) by allowing people to express their identities on an individualized space (the computer screen); at the same time blogs are also “spaces of surveillance, by oneself and by others” (Rocamora 2011: 418), where computer screens act as mirrors. Blogging cannot be fully understood, incidentally, without analyzing the effects that the myriad of single bloggers’ voices have on the field of fashion media—and on the field of fashion in general. The blogosphere, beginning as a simple discursive space for fashion amateurs (Rocamora and Bartlett 2009), has subsequently structured itself as a “key space for the production and the circulation of fashion discourse” (Rocamora 2011: 409), able to enhance a “hyper-textual fashion” (Rocamora 2012) where the system of links and the possibility of nonlinear reading are not only technical characteristics of Web space, but also a representation of the relational network in which the blogger is involved. A blog and its author are hence a node within today’s very extensive network, which may be analyzed as a field in the Bourdieusian sense (Rocamora 2015 forthcoming)—and, specifically, a subfield of the field of fashion media—internally characterized by struggles between established players and newcomers, and externally by an attempt of legitimization by the traditional owners of power (fashion journalists and brands).

In making such an analysis, care must be taken over breaking with both ordinary and scientific common-sense readings, which have become split along two dominant narratives: a communicational reading of blogs as a new fashion communication frontier able to challenge the power of journalists and the top-down circulation mechanism of

fashion communication; and a commercial reading of blogs as mere marketing instruments (in their dual function as instruments manipulated by brands or as the bloggers’ strategy for self-marketing).

But what is a “field,” according to Pierre Bourdieu? In which ways may this concept be useful in our study of fashion blogging? In short, a field is a “network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97) that works as an (extremely serious) game: social agents participate in a social competition using their winning cards, which are forms of available capital—in order to ensure themselves a stake that consists in the control of the field itself.

The main advantage of a field approach may be summarized through Bourdieu’s words: “To think in terms of field is to think relationally” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96), analyzing social agents as carriers of specific interests and different levels of resources, which are used to give “access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97). The struggle to control the field creates domination, submission, or homology between agents participating in the game, structuring the field upon a hierarchy differentiating those who have central positions from those who try to depose dominant players. Studying the blogosphere in terms of field will shift our attention towards relations (collaborative or conflicting) that are produced within this social space, between bloggers, but also between bloggers and the traditional sources of power and legitimization within the field of fashion, that is, brands and journalism.

What we may ask ourselves is: how is it possible that ordinary consumers and fashion-lovers can become significant speakers in the institutionalized field of fashion? Why do some of them succeed and others do not? How is the field internally differentiated? To answer these questions I believe it is important to concentrate on bloggers’ careers—what Bourdieu would call their “trajectory”—on the resources (forms of capital) used by bloggers to build their position, which increase as they gain dominant positions, and relational strategies with other bloggers, journalists, and fashion brands. Eventually, this analysis will allow us to speculate about which laws are working in the fashion blogging subfield.

Methodology

The following analysis is based on testimonies collected by forty in-depth interviews, conducted between 2011 and 2014 during a research project carried out within the Centre ModaCult of the Università Cattolica of Milan, Italy. The largest part of the sample (thirty-four interviewees) were Italian fashion bloggers who belong to heterogeneous areas of the fashion blogging pyramid, ranging from what we could call “A-list bloggers” (Ko 2012)—known nationally and/or worldwide and recognized as points of reference in this subfield—to largely unknown

ones. These interviewees managed personal blogs and were mainly females (twenty-five out of thirty-four), aged between seventeen and thirty at the time of the interview. Among the nine males, eight are bloggers and one is the manager of an A-list blog. The majority of them were based in northern Italy, with almost half the sample (thirteen bloggers and four key informants) living in Milan. I completed the sample with six key informants who are not themselves fashion bloggers but whose activities are related to blogging: four of them are fashion journalists, one is the editor of a lifestyle webzine which hosts both fashion bloggers and fashion-related issues, and another one is the founder of a network (with related website) for Italian fashion bloggers.

Access to the field of study was not particularly difficult, with the number of Italian blogs being large and rapidly increasing, and their contact information easily findable; the majority of bloggers contacted replied positively to the email asking about their availability for interview. Bloggers were not selected at random from the abundance of empirical material, but were found partly on the Web and partly by means of a snowball sample strategy (drawing upon offline relationships but also upon weblinks from one blog to another) in order to obtain a sampling within which different levels of success are represented.

The interviews are based on a non-directive method known as “life-story approach” (see Bertaux 1981) and focus on the practice of blogging in the interviewees’ everyday life. The interviewers (the author of this paper and BA and MA students who received an ad hoc methodological training for the project) met bloggers and key informants during one-to-one meetings (with one exception: an interview with two bloggers who co-author the same webpage) for a conversation which lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. The interview scheme was entirely unstructured and consisted of a highly generic initial stimulus (“Let’s talk about your experience as a fashion blogger, starting from whatever point you like”; in the case of the key informants: “Let’s talk about fashion blogging”), followed not by direct questions, but by recalling the interviewee’s words, with the aim of following their logical and narrative thread.

This article provides empirical evidence largely by using fragments of the interviews. In order to anonymize the respondents, quotation attributions will only show a pseudonym plus gender and age at the time of the interview. This is intended to standardize the treatment of any interviewee, as some bloggers and almost all the key informants expressed some concerns over privacy.

Career Bloggers

Independently from how successful a blogger becomes, her/his trajectory may be considered as a “career” starting from an initial point,

progressing through early and critical steps, and leading the author to occupy a precise space in the blogosphere. That position depends upon the intersection of two stories: that of the field itself, which was born in a chaotic way and develops in the confrontation with journalism, corporate fashion, and audience; and that of the single blogger who accesses the field with different forms and volumes of capitals and plays the game with various strategies aimed at gaining authority and trustworthiness, key factors that influence the credibility and the success of blogs and bloggers (see Chu and Kamal 2008; Rieh and Danielson 2007). Regarding the story of the field (see Figure 1 for further details), it must be remembered that fashion blogging in Italy developed some years later than in other countries: the “first generation” of successful

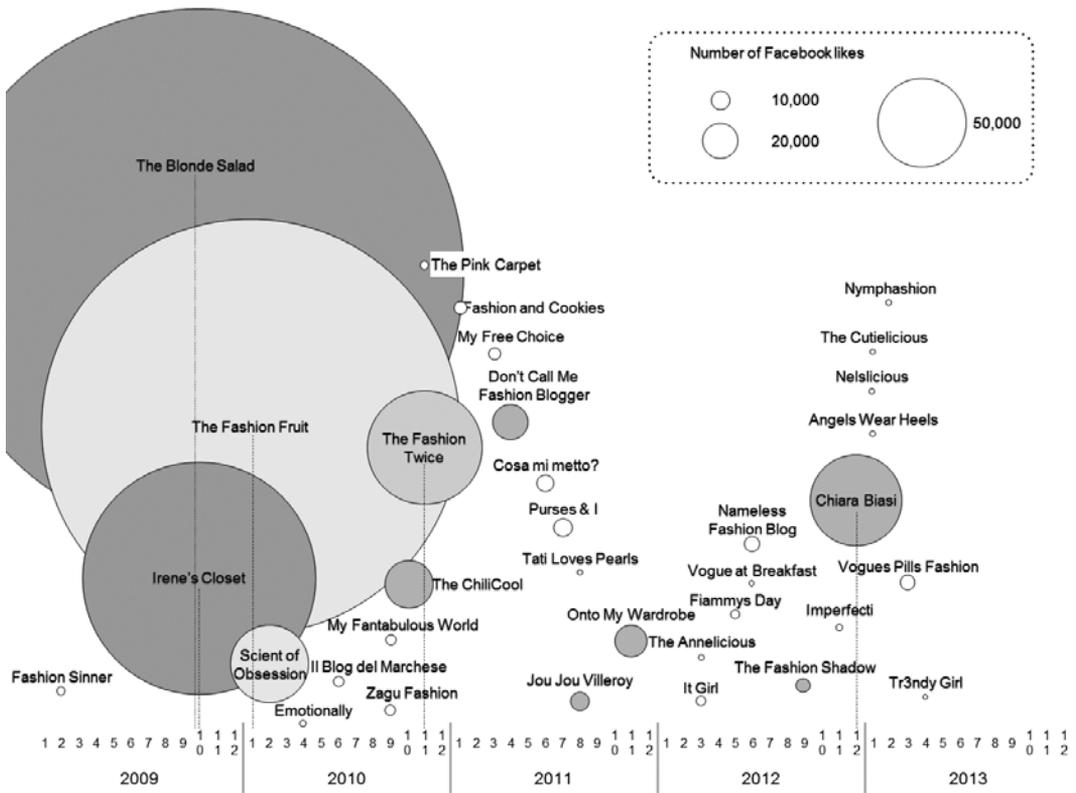


Figure 1
 The field of the Italian fashion blogs: most popular blogs (February 2014), date of launch, and number of Facebook likes. The illustration represents a map of the most popular Italian fashion blogs by showing the month and year of the first post and their popularity measured with reference to the number of Facebook likes (dimension of the circles). The selected blogs are listed in the ranking of the top twenty Italian fashion blogs provided by two websites (ScenarioMag.it and LesCahiersFM.com). Just five blogs appear in both lists. The latest version available at the time this article was submitted refers to February 2014. The author added to the listed blogs that of Chiara Ferragni (*The Blonde Salad*), which the above-mentioned websites do not take into consideration as regarded as being a professional and celebrity blog. Illustration by the author.

Italian bloggers came to light not earlier than 2009, the year in which Chiara Ferragni launched her *The Blonde Salad*.

In bloggers' accounts, reasons for opening a blog are all described as: "by chance." Before blogging, many start their activity of sharing looks and outfits via other online instruments (Flickr, Look-Book, or the images gallery on Style.it). With the same playful attitude, justified by their passion for fashion and the need to "have fun," interviewees migrate to blogging, accessing the platform which offers the highest degree of personalization and a large spreading potential along with minimum technological literacy.

The debut of many Italian bloggers has been encouraged by the example of international blogs that already provided a point of reference for fashion lovers and fashion system operators in other countries. But the decisive element is the low investment demanded when creating a blog, as well as the absence of risk in case the project does not work:

I started looking at blogs in 2009 when I moved to New York. In the States blogs are ahead, they've existed for ten years and they really are an important instrument that everybody recognizes as such. I came back from the United States and I started wondering "Why not start a blog myself? [...] Let's share our know-how on the Web, in any case everybody is doing it, it costs nothing, and at worst we will look like idiots—in which case we will shut the blog down. We would have had fun and in the process we would have created our personal archive! (Amanda, f, 28)

An element aiding the decision to start a blog (and to maintain it consistently) is the availability of free time—a condition encountered by young bloggers during university, right after graduation, while searching for a job, in a sabbatical period, or in an interval between two phases of their personal or professional life. However, there are also examples of different motivations for starting a blog. A blogger links the opening of her webpage to a "sense of frustration that derives from the fact of reading in the newspaper things I considered not to be true" (Patrizia, f, 28); a communicational need prompted by what she says is the acritical nature of fashion journalism. One of the key informants, the editor of a lifestyle blogzine¹ started in 2007, describes her decision as a second-best choice:

My partners and I wanted to open an online shop but we did not have the necessary economic capital to start the activity, and since we did not want to take out a loan, either from relatives or from a bank, we thought that we could make ourselves visible in the environment and then, once we had a name, we could move from blogging to commerce. (Manuela, key informant, f, 36)

To a certain degree, the example and popularity of existing bloggers played a role in encouraging people to start new blogs at a time by which the Italian fashion blogosphere was already structured and densely inhabited.

After starting a blog, the first key achievement is to be contacted by a traditional or online magazine, and to be invited as a blogger to fashion shows and events—this is, in fact, the first public legitimization given to young authors. A first contact with the “official” fashion world activates two linked processes. First, the blog enters into a communicative circuit and it becomes popular; as an A-list blog manager observes about the author of the blog:

An article was published in *Leggo* [a free press newspaper], totally spontaneously, that is, without an interview ... they actually wrote about her, this new phenomenon, this blogger ... I don't know how they got to know about her, perhaps they were already following her, perhaps because her blog already had several thousands of visits, 15,000 I believe ... the next day *Corriere della Sera* [the most read Italian newspaper] called us as they clearly want to be ahead [...] they asked to interview her [...] The next day *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa* and *Il Giornale* [other important national newspapers] called us ... then it snowballed right through the print media. The fashion week has gone, a lot of pictures, a lot of articles and so on, and Piero Chiambretti wants to interview her on the Chiambretti Show [TV show on a national broadcasting channel]. (Daniele, m, 25)

Second, popularity makes the blogger aware of her/his (unexpected) position in the field, following strategic choices. In the case of the aforementioned blog manager, these choices included refusing some television invitations, and other projects inconsistent with the blog. Most of the bloggers invested in clothing “since if you want to publish frequently, you always need new clothes” (Lorella, f, 23) and selected with which companies to collaborate, in order to construct a precise editorial line (“at that point, more than the number of visitors, I was much more interested in having—not really a professional image, because I still don't have that—but at least a certain coherence,” Roberta, f, 27). The choice would also be made to write also or only in English, in order to address an international audience. Such strategies distinguish more established (in terms of experience in the field and awareness of its rules) from less established bloggers, who are still enthusiastic—maybe somewhat naively—about the number of invitations and proposals they receive. In the experience of successful bloggers, even if popularity grows gradually, some key situations will accelerate the increase of their visibility and will raise their profile: for example, a blogger writes to the director of a popular women's magazine, criticizing the space given to the

most popular—but “untalented”—Italian blogger; or the A-list blogger Demetra Dossi is invited by a mainstream publishing house to write a novel (with the same name of the blog, that is, *Pigchic*), whose protagonist is, clearly, a blogger. In the majority of cases, an increase in visits to the blog is recorded during “giveaways,” which are competitions held by the blogger in collaboration with fashion brands, or after the blogger’s appearance as author or object of news in fashion magazines. Co-opted by fashion media and corporate fashion:

the bloggers’ freedom is, if not diminished, then certainly compromised. At the very least, it is likely that the more that bloggers liaise with the fashion establishment, the harder it will be to insist on their editorial independence. (Khamis and Munt 2010: 7)

When they think about future projects, at the moment when bloggers understand the potentialities of their activities, three main positions appear, together with an awareness of the difficulties connected to their emergence in a crowded environment. The first: “I don’t want it to be like a job” (Roberta, f, 27), is the—minority—position held by a blogger who already has a job and wants to keep blogging as a hobby, benefiting from its advantages, such as experiencing the fashion world from the inside. The second (more diffuse, but not as universal as many journalists think it is) is the desire to transform blogging into a career: “If I could, I would spend the whole day writing on my blog! If only we could find a big cool sponsor, which would allow us to do that!” (Amanda, f, 28). The third position is instrumental: using the blog to build a profession for oneself in the fashion world, but not as a blogger (“now the aim of all bloggers is to become a stylist, a journalist, an image consultant, whatever,” Patrizia, f, 28).

Forms of Capital, the Weapons of a Blogger

The description of the blogging experience as a career is useful in understanding the path of blogging as an evolutionary process. This success, perceived as unexpected by many bloggers, becomes a lot more predictable when one analyzes these careers in terms of the notion of field and considers the forms of capital bloggers use to establish themselves.

Bourdieu does not use the notion of “capital” in an economic sense only. He also uses it to indicate the resources available for social agents to compete in a social field. Three main forms of capitals exist—cultural, economic, and social (Bourdieu 1986)—beyond the specific capitals of each field, that is, those capitals which work only in that field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 108). Capitals may be understood as different currencies, convertible between each other: a degree may lead to a well-rewarded job, a good job may introduce the person to important social networks, and so on.

It is possible to distinguish three different forms of cultural capital: embedded (the product of familiar socialization), objectified (e.g. cultural products, books, works of art), and institutional (academic degrees) (Bourdieu 1979). Bloggers use a cultural capital accumulated through education and auto-didacticism. In my sample, fashion students are a minority. The data cannot in any case be generalized across the universe of Italian bloggers, but it is a sign that other forms of non-fashion-related scholastic capital exist, and they influence the activity of blogging: in particular, attending foreign language, marketing, and communication classes at university, which allows bloggers to acquire useful competences in blog management. Those who did not attend a fashion course are proud of this fact, stressing the importance of auto-didacticism (in learning techniques ranging from photography, to Web designing, Photoshop, management of Web platforms) and passion.

This "fashion attitude" (Benedetta, f, 25), which the bloggers refer to as an innate property, actually derives from a certain confidence about fashion, which in their accounts seems to be connected with the role of the family in taste development: relatives particularly dedicated to style (e.g. mother), the parents' occupation (e.g. clothing retailers), fashion magazines available at home. The perceived uselessness of scholarly capital and the strong emphasis on taste as "something innate that comes from inside" (Amanda, f, 28) represent a point of conflict with journalists, who underline the importance of knowledge. As a journalist key informant puts it:

Fashion must be contextualized in the moment it is produced and in the panorama where it exists. Personal taste does not really matter. (Flavio, key informant, m, 38)

The value of informal and formal cultural capital, in the form of "taste" and technological literacy, is supported by the availability of an initial economic capital. Those successful bloggers who cannot sustain themselves through earnings from their blog complain about the scarcity of financial resources, necessary to "manage the blog with more continuity" (Patrizia, f, 28).

Time and geographical place also play a role as forms of economic capital: time dedicated to blogging is time subtracted from other activities, while the closeness to fashion hubs (Milan in particular) is perceived as an advantage by bloggers, since it lowers travel costs and increases the possibility of participating in events.

In the case of economic capital, most bloggers reflected on the possibility of making money out of blogging. It is a diffused idea, but not completely verifiable, that in Italy only a limited group of bloggers can generate profits out of this activity. This is undeniably true for *The Blonde Salad*, structured as a proper cultural industry where the blogger does not work alone, but focuses only on the editorial aspect, leaving

to others the managerial and commercial areas, public relations, and relations with the media. For other bloggers, *The Blonde Salad*, even if heavily criticized, is the point of reference, the pinnacle of a pyramid of blogging as a profession; below it are heterogeneous positions that range from (minority) bloggers who may declare “I’m sustaining myself through jobs connected to blogging” (Eleonora, f, 26), to complete outsiders who complain “I do not make a cent” (Antonio, m, 23).

The profit channels discussed by the bloggers can be divided between benefits (clothes and accessories given by brands so that bloggers can sponsor them in their blogs, travel expenses to participate in events) and financial rewards (from companies that use bloggers for advertising through banners or supporting giveaways, from online shops that give the blogger a percentage of sales made as a result of the blog, from magazines paying for collaborations).

To cultural and economic capitals, social capital (Bourdieu 1980) must be added as a third factor that strengthens one’s power in a field. It consists of the relational networks of the agent and its social group, which may vary in size and quality. If some bloggers achieve a central position in the field, this happens because their blog, the product of their cultural and economic capitals, is able to generate an expansion of their social network both online and offline. On the Internet social capital is measured both quantitatively (the number of visits and followers, checked by bloggers via a specific application, and which determine the basis of their advertisement price list) and qualitatively (readers’ comments). In everyday life a blog is the access channel to the field of fashion; participating in events and fashion shows generates a number of contacts between peers (other bloggers) and fashion professionals (photographers, PRs, journalists, etc.). Bloggers then become a constant presence in fashion events—catwalk shows, after-show parties, launches etc.—progressively naturalized, and gaining what Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) call “fashion capital,” that is, a form of capital which is specific to the field of fashion and which then emerges in bloggers’ habitus,² objectifying “forms of cultural capital in the guise of clothes and accessories from fashionable and exclusive brands” (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006: 746).

Interaction between different forms of capital produces a sort of meta-capital, a fourth capital which Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital”; it consists of the forms taken by different capitals when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate (Bourdieu 1987: 152) and is a guarantee of power, prestige, and distinction for those who possess it. In this specific case, symbolic capital consists in the level of legitimization reached by the fashion blogger. It provides a double consecration: within the sub-field of fashion blogging as an A-list blogger and gatekeeper of taste; inside the wider field of fashion media to assert blogging as an activity as legitimate as fashion journalism and institutional brand communication. Bloggers build their legitimization through their relation with their

audience, whose comments represent an important source of gratification and the drive to continue. With regard to readers, there are diverse objectives; some bloggers aim at audience numbers, others at the quality of contents and niche audiences.

A second source for legitimization are “colleague” bloggers, those who have “a point of view similar to mine, who can make more specific, more consistent comments” (Giuditta, f, 27); among the limited group of A-listers an experience such as Werelse’s (a brand whose collections are designed by Chiara Ferragni and two other internationally famous colleagues, Andy Torres and Carolina Engman) represents an international band of bloggers where protagonists in the field legitimate each other as designers.

Legitimization from power holders in the fashion field is, of course, fundamental: magazines “opening their doors to bloggers” (Benedetta, f, 25) and companies elevating them to the role of interlocutors and testimonial-givers.

Field Strategies

Possessing capital, in its diverse forms and in different quantities, explains the different positions occupied by bloggers in the field, and the strategies used to interact with other bloggers and with the field of fashion media. Although the field of blogging is young, there is already an attempt to distinguish between first-comers and late-comers, according to a mechanism that Bourdieu observes in many fields (see Bourdieu and Delsaut 1975 for an example in the field of *haute couture*). Emulating successful blogs is the strategy newcomers adopt, finding points of reference and encouragement to “try” already tested projects. Much emphasis is put on collaboration and on “positive relations with other bloggers” (Giuditta, f, 27), a signal that the field is perceived as wide and full of resources, despite the fact that the national market for fashion blogging cannot guarantee high visibility to an endless number of players. Collaboration results in participating in a common environment: bloggers often meet at events and fashion shows, comment reciprocally on each other’s blogs, and share information on future events. Collaboration is possible between peer bloggers: both in the wide intermediate group of bloggers who have reached a certain popularity, but are not yet so famous as to be afraid of competitors; and among A-list bloggers, as in the case of Werelse (cited above), where the blogging experience led to the creation of a fashion brand.

Nonetheless, the most evident strategy in their accounts is differentiation. Being unable to occupy the same space as the hegemonic blog by Chiara Ferragni (who “became *the* blogger, basically she created a role which did not previously exist in Italy,” Daniele, m, 25) other bloggers are the representation of the Bourdieusian adage *exister c’est*

différer—in other words: “to exist in a field [...] is to differentiate oneself” (Bourdieu 2005: 39). They distinguish themselves from those blogs they see as bowing down to marketing and commerce (a form of “pure consumerism” animated by “fashion prostitutes who sell, promote anything has been given to them,” Carla, f, 24) and are opposed to the idea of blogs as platforms of product recommendations (Pulizzi and Barrett 2009). The differences they identify concern thematic extension (“we include many different things, we talk about travel a lot,” Amanda, f, 28), depth in the search for content, a critical attitude towards mainstream fashion, the search for a niche audience, exhibiting an alternative style, resistance to commercial brand pressures, and the struggle against the label “blogger”:

I don't like to be defined as a fashion blogger, in Italy this label has a meaning I don't recognize for myself, in the sense that fashion bloggers are characters like Chiara Ferragni and others ... They let the fashion blogger become someone superficial, at least this is the way I perceive it. Hence, just “blogger” please. (Giuditta, f, 27)

Collaborative and conflicting relations also affect the relationships between bloggers and corporate fashion, on the one side, and fashion journalism on the other. In the case of fashion companies, in a blogger's career the initial surprise caused by the first invitations to fashion shows and the first gifts received from brands is followed by a concern with maintaining a balance between commercial pressure and editorial independence. It is an issue that most interviewees emphasize: even when reviewing products and hosting banners or giveaways, bloggers stress their “selecting” capacity, welcoming only those requests which are in line with their style. Furthermore, the most experienced bloggers underline they are conscious of the fact that a brand's invitation does not correspond to “consecration” and that companies try to use blogs as a marketing tool. In the Italian blogosphere *The Blonde Salad* represents the culmination of a blogger's professionalization, a skillful self-branding operation which works as a business, distinguishing managerial from artistic functions.

In terms of the bloggers' relation to fashion journalism (see Pedroni 2014 for a wider analysis) blogging is perceived either as an alternative or as complementary to it. “Alternative” has different meanings: online as an alternative to paper; bloggers' editorial independence as an alternative to acritical fashion journalism where “you can never find a real critical comment of a fashion show, a designer, or a collection” (Patrizia, f, 28); an “alternative trajectory to that of traditional journalism” (Patrizia, f, 28), a “gym for a blogger [where] s/he can write, be known, [...] a different path to reach the world of journalism” (Beatrice, f, 30) for bloggers who want to do this job (at least four of our sample).

When discussing the differences between blogging and journalism, the bloggers recognize that the former lacks a deontological code and a specific training course, and they complain about their experience at first in the field of blogging, saying that they have received criticism from journalists who felt challenged within the field of the fashion media.

Yet, complementarity between blogging and traditional journalism is visible in many collaborations, and especially in the case of fashion magazines that write about bloggers and use bloggers as correspondents or to promote giveaways, competitions, and initiatives “to drive readers to interact with the magazine” (Marta, f, 24).

All in all, the analysis of the careers, forms of capital, and strategies of Italian bloggers shows that even in its first years of life the field of blogging is already structured as a symbolic hierarchy among amateurs and experts. Blogs, thanks to their democratizing capital (Berry 2010), allow the entrance of the fashion lover’s voice into the chorus of fashion communication; these “outsiders” may remain simple consumers or may become professional bloggers, when they succeed in multiplying their initial capital until the point where they establish a central position in the blogosphere. The “insider” blogger, whose position in the field of fashion is legitimized, can then exercise his/her function as expert both in an official way, writing in fashion magazines or promoting a brand, and—with the same symbolic force—in an unaffiliated way.

The Italian blogosphere initially looked like a highly fragmented market with many small “businesses” but gradually it became a more condensed market into which a limited number of dominant blogs have emerged, while at the frontiers of the field newcomers are constantly trying to enter, stimulated by the success of older bloggers. Early entrance into the field has been decisive in achieving hegemonic positions. In the meantime, between the perimeters and the center, a large intermediate strip of not (yet) professional bloggers is widening, co-opted by magazines and fashion businesses. Amongst them, those who aspire to a more central position are seeking to differentiate themselves from the dominant players. Perhaps over the coming years we may expect the emergence of new models for fashion blogging from this sector of the field—blogs that have a more critical and independent style, opposing the commercial model of today’s hegemonic blogs.

Is Fashion Blogging a (Sub)Field?

According to Bourdieu (1993: 72–7) a social space can be defined as a field when it works upon four laws of functioning—which he calls “invariants” because they are common to all fields. First: struggle. Within fields, which are “arenas of struggle for legitimation” (Swartz 1997: 122), there is a conflicting tension between dominant positions (bloggers with higher visibility and page-hits) and newcomers who occupy marginal positions (non-A-list bloggers). The second invariant law is

hierarchy. The tension resulting from an uneven distribution of the forms of capital produces an internal hierarchical differentiation between orthodoxy (embodied by the dominant model of blogging, such as *The Blonde Salad's*) and heterodoxy (exemplified by critical, alternative, self-proclaimed independent bloggers)—in Bourdieu's words, a struggle for the “monopoly of cultural legitimacy and the right to withhold and confer this consecration” (Bourdieu 1971: 178). Third: field preservation. The struggle to keep or occupy the center of the field takes place on the basis of a tacit agreement aimed at safeguarding the field: whoever challenges hegemonic positions does not aim to destroy the field but to acquire control of it. The last and most important invariant law: autonomy, as “fields are structured to a significant extent by their own internal mechanisms of development and thus hold some degree of autonomy from the external environment” (Swartz 1997: 126). For the person who is placed outside the field and is not involved in the competition, the field apparently lacks logic, a logic that is in fact specific to each single field and that allows us to say that they are microcosms of the wider social space. For someone unfamiliar with the dynamics of the blogosphere, the proliferation of fashion blogs on which young people publish pictures of themselves dressed up with fashion brands may seem like a narcissistic behavior; comments like “Wow! Love the dress!” may be seen as limited levels of interaction, far from the potentialities of Web 2.0 as a place for discussion; and the fact that barely grown-up people challenge fashion journalism seems to be giving the young excessive power. However, analyzing personal trajectories, forms of capital, and the strategies of participants to the blogosphere shows the perfect logic of this microcosm which has established its own laws (and this is indeed the etymological meaning of “autonomy”).

This autonomy is in any case relative, and justifies the classification of fashion blogging as a subfield of the fashion media (Rocamora 2015 forthcoming). Bloggers belong to the latter, where they entered the scene as newcomers, challenged dominant players, and achieved a hegemonic position alongside fashion journalists—a famous example is the former Web developer Bryan Grey Yambao, who has become an Internet and fashion celebrity with his blog *Bryanboy* and can regularly be seen at the front row of fashion shows. But the real sign of the blogosphere's hegemony is the fact that it partially rewrote the laws of the field: blogs have refashioned the old media, “incorporating some of their defining traits in their own digital pages” (Rocamora 2012: 93).

Nevertheless, the wide popularity of some bloggers should not allow us to think that the whole blogosphere has occupied the center of the field of the fashion media, nor should we forget that blogging has itself been influenced by the rules of fashion journalism and corporate communication, e.g. the quantitative attention to audience as success index and the tension arising between its two dimensions (on one side, blogs as cultural products, on the other, blogs as commodities).

Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion

The object of this study, and the on-the-move nature of the blogosphere, inevitably means that this article suffers from several limitations. I will list those of which I am aware, regarding them as possible directions for future research. First, my research only focused on the personal blogs of bloggers who, when they started their site did not belong to the professional world of fashion, but of course there are other types of blog. Among personal blogs are those written by fashion journalists or other fashion professionals, such as photographers, and celebrities; and, in addition, corporate blogs. Second, if we consider the analytical division of the blogosphere into three constitutive poles—blogs as texts, bloggers as producers, readers as consumers (see Rocamora and Bartlett 2009: 106)—this article is mainly focused on the level of production. Third, while it is true that the Italian fashion blogosphere is a predominantly female universe (see the ranking of top blogs on specialized websites such as ScenarioMag.it and LesCahiersFM.com), a number of male voices are emerging; going ahead with my research on this topic, I aim at collecting a greater number of men's experiences to balance my sample. Moreover, interviews capture a single moment in the life of a rapidly changing field, in a relevant geographical area for fashion (Italy), but undoubtedly have limitations. Future research may aim at building a transnational and diachronic perspective by comparing different states of the field over both time and space.

Aware of these limits, in my research I analyzed the Italian fashion blogosphere, showing how far it works as a social field which obeys the laws of autonomy, struggle, internal hierarchization, and field preservation, related to the wider field of the fashion media. I took into account three issues characterizing the literature about blogging—its relation to the world of information, its degree of independence, its identity and discursive function—in order to highlight two dominant narratives diffused in both journalism and academia: blogs as promoter of a bottom-up revolution in fashion communication, and blogs as mere instruments of corporate marketing. To challenge these commonly held perceptions I examined my empirical material by reconstructing the steps of bloggers' careers, the cultural, economic, and social resources they use and accumulate, and the strategies they employ to struggle within the field. I consider of central importance the necessity to look at the blogosphere as an autonomous microcosm—not that blogs necessarily have editorial independence, but that they operate following laws specific to the blogosphere.

"I usually say that I stumble on the heels of my blog" (Michela, f, 22), says a blogger who wants to justify the mistakes she made during her experience. In a few years, the progressive autonomization of the blogosphere will perhaps enable bloggers to walk more firmly, even the amateurs and newcomers.

Notes

1. When using the word “blogzine” I refer to an online magazine published in blog format. Unlike the blogs I analyzed for the article, blogzines are multi-authored, they use a less personal tone, they are divided into thematic sections and cover a variety of topics.
2. In the language of Pierre Bourdieu (1997), “habitus” identifies acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, an ability (socially constructed) to build social reality. These “dispositions” are both mental and bodily, as they determine how individuals think and act.

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