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THE FASHION BLOGOSPHERE IN ROMANIA. FASHIONSCAPE AND FASHION BLOGGERS.

Anamaria TOMIUC, Oana STAN

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The Fashion Blogosphere in Romania. Fashionscape and Fashion Bloggers.

Anamaria TOMIUC¹
Oana STAN²

Abstract

As a consequence of the expansion of social media, this article explores the growing popularity of fashion blogging in Romania, by pointing out the existence of three categories of blogs that render the particularities of the contemporary fashion blogosphere. Within this classification, fashion blogs are viewed as a form of social activity providing interaction spaces, promotional spaces and analytical spaces that arouse curiosity, inspiration and desire and create a unique experience for the reader, a specific mood that incites both engagement and sharing. Furthermore, this research investigates the transition towards fame and reputation of the fashion blogger whose (trans)formation as a trendsetter, attention leader, endorser or taste-maker and knowledge creator plays an essential role in the genuine fashionscape (the established fashion system, industry and fashion media). The research was conducted on 21 of Romania's top fashion blogs, focusing on an elaborate layout and content analysis of these blogs, as well as on the analysis of their feedback (public comments), their development and evolution (in time and number of followers) and their interconnectedness with other social media such as Facebook and Instagram. The findings of the analysis reveal that the fashion bloggers create a unique interaction with their readers that leads to the reshaping of the Romanian fashionscape by generating discussions concerning style, lifestyle, and fashion trends and influencing the buying behavior of these readers. Thus, the fashion blogosphere becomes an important component in communicating and promoting fashion. This research also reveals that through their influence on their fashion audiences, the fashion bloggers have the ability

¹ Senior lecturer, PhD, University of Art and Design, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, anamaria_tomiuc@yahoo.com.

² Online fashion editor, Zipcode Fashion, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, zipcodefashion@gmail.com

to function as important social actors, observation which opens up this study to future research.

Keywords: *fashion blogosphere, social activity, fashionscape, fashion blogger*

Introduction

In recent years, blogging has become one of the most popular forms of expression and communication within the social media with an increasing effect on their audience. In the particular case of Romania, blogging activities have reached in 2014 over 86.000 blogs with 2.500.000 posts and over 1.700.000 comments according to the Zelist Monitor (Zelist, 2015) and a series of studies prove the constant growth of the phenomenon since 2004 (SABR, 2015), The Romanian Blogosphere Report (Cocioaba & Negrea, 2015). In terms of approached subjects, Romanian blogs cover an extended area: personal interest, entertainment, politics, tourism, news, sports, education, economics, new media and technology, environment, music, film, lifestyle and other diverse subjects.

In this general context, we chose to focus on the very dynamic area of the fashion blogs, in order to observe the particularities and the building up of a specific type of blogosphere that is the fashion blogosphere as well as its general influence within the Romanian fashionscape. We will therefore investigate this scene, starting from the premise that at the moment, the fashion system is in a constant change and transformation, rather experimental than highly established and we will observe the role of the fashion blogger within.

Structurally, in the first part of the article, the research reviews a series of theories that conceptualize fashion blogging, while the second part is a qualitative analysis of 21 of the most popular fashion blogs in terms of Facebook likes and friends that would point out important aspects such as: blog layout and content, categories of blogs, feedback and evolution, interconnectedness in social media, blogger profiles and impact on the audience. The analysis proves that fashion blogging is the fastest tool for communicating fashion and gains an increasing position within the fashionscape, while bloggers gain an important social reputation and the power to reinforce a whole system.

Context. The Romanian fashionscape

The term “fashionscape” has been recently used to describe the landscape of fashion, an interdisciplinary concept that relates to a series of ideas, images, texts, actions, interpretation and knowledge on fashion, media and consumer research. Fashion as a cultural, symbolic product has reached an institutionalized profile, with a systemic structure that legitimizes designers’ creativity, adds value and promotes high profile creations through various media to a large area of consumers (within different markets) (Kawamura, 2005). Supported by the clothing industry, the fashion system originated in Paris has globally extended. Still, at the moment, in Romania, despite clothing industry playing an important role in the manufacturing sector, accounting to a major share of the country’s exports (Avrigeanu & Anghel, 2012), the internal market is poorly competitive, due both to ineffective sales and marketing activities and to the decreased financial force of the population. Therefore, the building up of a structured fashion system is highly influenced by these factors, as there is a restricted marketplace for fashion designers, as well as very few institutions or actors that play on this stage: art universities, Bucharest Fashion Week and Romanian Fashion Week Iasi, professional magazines such as Elle, Harper’s Bazaar, a series of distributors (such as Armoire & Co) and branded designer companies (such as Irina Schrotter or Levintza & co). Nevertheless, the constantly expanding online market significantly changes the commercial procedures, offering designers a space for selling and promoting their creations, and consumers an exquisite selection and buying experience. It is within this new media and e-commerce context that fashion bloggers gain increasing power.

Blogging. The fashion blogosphere

Research points out that the blog phenomenon has been first mentioned in 1997 (while by 2002 more than 500 articles have been already referring to it). Blogs appeared as a new way to share information of interest and were characterized by three primary features: chronological order, linking content to websites of interest and comments on those links. In the blog, the potentialities of technology, different sets of cultural patterns, diverse subjects have been combined to find a conventional mode of expression, a new “genre” contributing to the art of the self as blogs reflect their bloggers’ personalities, (Miller

& Shepherd, 2004) and to the building up of a social community, as blogs become a form of social activity, with a particular impact on their audience (Nardi, 2004). The term blogosphere is used as a concept that includes the totality of blogs building up a social network system, as they are all interconnected and provide their readers the possibility to actively engage by comments and feed-back. We will refer to this term in connection with fashion and the fashionscape, thus we understand the fashion blogosphere as an umbrella term for the comprising areal of blogs, bloggers and their related communities that focus on issues, ideas, images and everything else related to fashion. In this domain, the earliest fashion blogs appeared in the mid 2000's and were defined by the sharing of fashion content. The bloggers main focus was on presenting their own preferences, on referring to various websites and pictures of established fashion magazines or companies. With inspiration from the first fashion blogs, fashion magazines started to incorporate blog elements on their websites (Engholm & Hansen-Hansen, 2013), instantly offering credibility to this new genre.

In what concerns research on the fashion blogosphere, there are very few authors who have concentrated on the fashion blogging phenomenon and investigated it from different angles: classification of fashion blogs (Engholm & Hansen-Hansen, 2013), effects on their audience (McQuarrie, Miller, & Philips, 2013), top ranking and efficacy (Sedeke & Arora, 2012). Engholm & Hansen-Hansen discuss four types of fashion blogs according to their design and the analyses of social-self presentation strategies enabled: the *Professionals* (blogs produced by fashion magazines that reproduce the existing offline and online formats of professional magazines), *Fashionindustrias* (reporting in professional style subjects of the fashion industry and reproducing the hierarchies or traditions familiar from the fashion industry), *Street Style* (reporting on real people found in the street and functioning as an extra mediating link between the style of the street and the level of trend forecasters and style surfers on whom the fashion media and producers rely in order to predict trends) and *Narcissus* (public DIY fashion diary, centered on people (especially women) who put themselves on display, offering the possibility for direct dialogue and change of experience with their readers). Their analysis states that blogs promote established structures in the fashion system, but contribute to breaking down the historical monopoly of the fashion magazines in disseminating fashion,

establishing new hierarchies and introducing different temporal conditions for the production and distribution of fashion content (Engholm & Hansen-Hansen, 2013). McQuarrie, Miller & Philips point out the trajectory from the status of “ordinary people” to economically and socially rewarded persons who gain massive audience and cultural capital while producing a particular kind of taste judgment and thus acquiring the taste-maker status and acting like cultural capitalists. (McQuarrie, Miller, & Philips, 2013). Sedeke and Arora discuss the bloggers’ identity, the culture of their blogs and their marketing potential and point out through a qualitative content analysis the important aspects of an effective fashion blog, placed in a high position in blog rankings: simplicity and personalization, everyday use of fashion, different styles, emerging fashion designers, authenticity, interactivity, and social media presence. (Sedeke & Arora, 2012)

In Romania, the first fashion blogs started to become visible in 2006, 2007, and because of the lack of a functional fashion system and of the very few events consecrated to fashion, these first blogs focused on creations of emergent Romanian fashion designers, or shared information from the international fashionscape. Around 2010, the Romanian fashion blogosphere started to diversify, with the popularity of personal style blogs that addressed to a larger audience and focused more on visual content, discussing trends and individual preferences and styles. Bloggers started to gain prestige and to cooperate with companies in order to promote specific designers, events or fashion products. Similar to the international scene, the role and the status of the fashion blogger is in constant transformation, becoming professional and renowned. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of fashion blogs in Romania. The study conducted on the Romanian blogosphere (Cocioaba & Negrea, 2015) points out that the number of blogs written by women has significantly grown. If in 2009, female blogosphere reached 31 percent, in 2011 it has reached 40 percent, and in 2014, 51%. This increase is largely due to the development of specialized blogs, niche blogs. In the same time, the Standout study (SABR, 2015) reveals that the influence of blogs on their readers is growing compared to previous years, and many of the top blogs have increased their audience as well as the effervescence of their community and have managed to build through substantial views and relevant recommendations a capital of trust among their readers. These

studies however focus on all categories of blogs existent in the Romanian blogosphere, and do not focus entirely on the fashion blogosphere. In the case of academic research, although there are a series of studies that focus on the textile and garments industry or a series of PhD theses focusing on the Romanian fashion system, we could not find Romanian contributions to the fashion blogosphere.

Research methods

In this context, the aim of this paper is to analyze the Romanian situation, by investigating 21 blogs that have been highly positioned in the only ranking system available online that focuses on different categories of blogs. Still, one of the issues we faced in conducting our analysis was the lack of relevant rankings based on solid criteria of the Romanian fashion blogosphere. The selection of blogs analyzed in this paper was made by consulting the rank available on the site Facebrands.ro (www.facebrands.ro), an online service which monitors Facebook pages in Romania according to the number of followers, as well as by choosing the relevance of the blogs according to their place in the Google search engine. Our selection of blogs focused on three main aspects: interaction, analysis, and promotion. The 21 blogs on which we conducted the analysis have been divided into three categories according to their main focus: self-centered fashion blogs, content centered fashion blogs, and product centered fashion blogs. The first category represents blogs which are usually identified as “personal style blogs”, we chose to refer to them as “self-centered fashion blogs” because we considered that the bloggers personal style wasn’t the main focus of their blogs but their own persona generating all other aspects presented on the blog. It is through self-analysis and promotion that the blogger, an outsider to the fashionscape becomes a trendsetter, attention leader and online endorser. The second category focuses on blogs which use their content as main tool in their pursuit to become knowledge creators, and taste maker. The third category is represented by blogs belonging to online shops, focused on selling products. These blogs do not have a personal voice, and use their content to endorse fashion, not themselves. All analyzed blogs focus on women fashion; blogs focusing on male fashion were not introduced in this study due to the small number of blogs, as well as their short history in the Romanian blogosphere.

We conducted an analysis focused on the visual and verbal parts / texts of 21 Romanian fashion blogs with emphasis on the blog's layout and the way in which it generates three distinct spaces: a space for interaction found at the bottom of every blog post, composed of the comments posted by the readers and the blogger's responses, a space for analysis, in the centre, identified as the actual blog post composed of a visual and a verbal / textual part, and a space for promotion, found on the lateral sides of the blog's layout where bloggers present their portfolio of collaborations, different ads and links to other social media platforms are displayed. Although the blog layout is a standard layout used by all such online platforms, what differs is the way in which the above mentioned spaces are used by the bloggers in order to convey their message. Thus the 21 fashion blogs analyzed in this article were divided into three categories: self-centered fashion blogs, content centered fashion blogs, and product centered fashion blogs.

The blogs were subjected to a qualitative analysis approached from a historical perspective, from their first blog posts until their most recent ones in order to observe the way in which the interaction, analysis and promotional spaces create a unique dialogue. By accessing every blog's archive, we analyzed 30 blog posts (10 of the first blog posts, 10 intermediate blog posts, and 10 recent blog posts). The analysis of these blog posts focused on their visual and textual content, as well as on the analysis of their feedback (public comments), their development and evolution and their interconnectedness with other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Self Centered Fashion Blogs

Nine out of the twenty one fashion blogs chosen for this study belong to this category. The reason for analyzing so many blogs from this category is because it is the most predominant type of blog in the Romanian blogosphere, so in order to gather sufficient information to validate our premises we considered necessary to include in our study all of the leading self-centered fashion blogs according to the Facebrands site. All 9 bloggers from this category are female, and began blogging as ordinary consumers outside of the fashion system. Most of them started their blog around 2010, and even though they were outsiders to the fashionscape, they were not outsiders to the blogosphere. Taking into consideration the fact that the international fashion blogosphere started

developing around 2005, the Romanian fashion blogs held the knowledge needed to create a coherent space on their blogs. This aspect is even more visible in the case of some of the self-centered fashion blogs that started their blog later than those from 2010. If we look at their first ten posts, we can observe that although the text resembles a diary, giving it a personal tone, their content is filled with mentions of different beauty products pieces of apparel, the images are of poor quality, but there are many close-ups on specific products. For example, in the case of miu-miu.ro all of her first 10 blog posts represent images of products accompanied by short or medium length texts in which she talks about the products in the images, communicating to the readers her personal consumer experience. The feedback from her readers is consistent, and reveals their interest in her recommendations.

In the case of self centered fashion blogs the space reserved for analysis is composed of mainly medium length texts written from a personal perspective, describing their outfits, giving styling tips, recommending products, promoting events, talking about their personal experiences. The text is accompanied by good quality images depicting the blogger in different stylized outfits, and as the blog gains visibility and a consistent number of followers, the images start resembling professional photo shootings, and deliver a visual narrative which in most cases generates a distinct mood for the readers to enjoy. By analysing this space we noticed a great interest for personal promotion and promotion of personal projects combined with the promotion of different products, reason for which most of the bloggers from this category are regarded as online endorsers. So, in the case of self centered fashion blogs, the analytical space translates into a space where the blogger, through a constant rendering of her stylized lifestyle offers a personal analysis of her own life which ceases to be private and becomes a standard for wellbeing, beauty, style. Through this space, the blogger is building the image of a trendsetter, attention leader and online endorser. In some cases, the use of products and brand names almost feels like a strategy orchestrated by the blogger in order to draw attention to specific brands which could choose to use the blogger as endorser for their products due to their considerable online exposure. By affiliating their image to those brands, the bloggers gain credibility and get to be viewed as trendsetters among their readers.

The most effervescent space on this type of blogs is the interaction space. This is where the dialogue between the blogger and the readers takes place. On each analysed blog the number of comments increased throughout the years (10 to 20 comments/blog post at the beginning, and more than 30 in the most recent blog posts), and the most active commentators were those that received feedback from the blogger. Some of the bloggers were active in the interaction space only at the beginning, and were almost entirely absent in the last 10 blog posts analysed. These bloggers were the ones whose number of comments decreased once they stopped interacting with their readers.

By creating constant content and a consistent fan base, the fashion bloggers gain credibility and manage to access the professional fashionscape. They start participating in different events, become endorsers for different brands, organize workshops, and appear in major fashion publications. All these achievements are presented to their followers on their blog in the space which we identified as the space for promotion. One of the most relevant examples is Ana Morodan's blog where the space for promotion reveals not only her numerous collaborations in the fashionscape, but also her transformation into a personal brand. She has an online store, a YouTube channel, advertorial contracts with international brands, awards, styling courses.

With the help of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, fashion bloggers have the chance to expand their personal image space. They use these platforms to offer their followers an even more personal interaction. Regarded as an extension of their blogs, their accounts on Facebook and Instagram are composed mainly of selfies or images taken from their blog portraying different day to day activities, with focus on details and constant updates in order to keep their followers informed and on track with everything they do. The engagement of their followers is, in some cases, even higher than on the blog.

Content Centered Fashion Blogs

Seven out of the twenty one fashion blogs chosen for this study belong to this category. More than half of them are among the first niche blogs from the Romanian blogosphere. Unlike the blogs from the self centered category, the name of the blog constitutes reference to their content, not to their personal identity. The identity of the blogger is not

the focus of the blog posts; it is only briefly presented in the “About us” section of the blog. Some of the blogs owners are working in the professional fashion system, like Maurice Munteanu (Le Projet d’Amour) who is fashion editor at ELLE magazine, Lavinia Ban (Fashion Salad) who works in the academic field of fashion, or Irina Markovitz who is a fashion consultant.

The space reserved for analysis on these blogs is composed of medium and long texts, accompanied by good quality images taken from different internet sites. The main focus of the blog posts is to present, analyse, and discuss different designer collections, trends, designer profiles, or different aspects concerning the current state of the fashion industry. Although the selection of subjects presented in the blog posts reveals the personal preferences of each blogger, the tone of the texts is in most cases rather impersonal, objective, and theoretical. If in the case of self centered fashion blogs, only a few of the bloggers had references to Romanian fashion design, in the case of content centered fashion blogs we observed that all of the analyzed blogs would display interest on different Romanian designers, reviewing their collections, using items from their collection to give styling tips, visiting their studios, and attending industry events focused on Romanian design.

The space for interaction is not as dynamic as that of the self centered blogs, but the number of comments per blog post is constant throughout the years (between five and ten comments/blog post). Their followers, fewer in number than those from the first category of blogs, usually engage in conversations related to the textual content, and contribute with their personal view on the subjects the bloggers wrote about. In many cases the blogger’s interaction with the audience is missing, revealing a low interest towards building a consistent fan base.

The content centered fashion blogs use social media platforms to share their blog posts, to share other articles from different internet sites that discuss similar themes, or in some cases to post personal images of themselves. The interaction with their readers is similar in number to the one on the blog. Only some of this category’s bloggers have Instagram accounts, they are the same ones who post images of them on their blog from time to time. The focus on content and the lack of interest in self-promotion, and social media display of privacy defines the blogger from this category as a knowledge creator rather than an endorser, arousing curiosity rather than desire. This is why the space for promotion on this

type of blogs, besides links to other social media platforms (which we analyzed above), is different to the space of the blogs belonging to the first category. Very few ads are being displayed, there are very few mentions of collaborations (style diary collaborates with an online book store; mauvert collaborates with an airline company and an online boutique).

Product centered fashion blogs

We analysed five blogs from this category. The reason for choosing to as a subject blogs belonging to online stores was to see how the impact of the blogosphere influenced the way in which the selling of products changed in the online environment.

A distinct feature was the absence of an individual identity behind the blogs. The content of the blogs are either written by employed personnel working for the online store, or written by collaborators who in some cases are bloggers whose blogs we analysed earlier in the article. All of the five blogs were created, as well as the online store to which they belong, after the year 2010. The space for analysis is reserved for objective reviews and presentations of the designers and collections sold in the online stores, articles announcing different events organized or sponsored by the online store, or styling articles in which pieces from the online store are used. The images used to convey visual content in the blog posts are of good quality and depict mainly clothing items which are sold on the online store. An interesting employment of this space was found on Molecule-f which is also the only blog out of those analysed in this category who invites different online endorsers (ex: Ana Morodan) to write self centered blog posts using as inspiration different items from the store. In this way, they are accessing the endorser's fan base and gain a greater online exposure.

The space for interaction is absent in this category. It seems that the lack of a personal approach, as well as a lack in blog post frequency (some of the blogs post once a month, once every two months, in comparison with the personal image based blogs who post 3 or more times per week) do not appeal to the online readers.

In the case of product based fashion blogs the space for promotion is represented by the virtual store. There are no collaborations mentioned on the lateral sides of the blog's layout, no ads displayed because the blog's purpose is to promote its own online store.

Their activity on other social media platforms is more constant and consistent, but we should take into consideration that the Facebook and Instagram account belongs to the online store, not the blog. The main focus of both accounts is to promote products in slightly different way than on the blog. These platforms are used as a sort of newsletter so that their customers and potential customers know about the store's activity and offers

Conclusions

Although the Romanian fashion blogosphere still remains an uncharted territory in the field of research, the analysis conducted in this article shows that we are witnessing a new way of communicating fashion. Through their content, their feedback and interconnectedness in social media, the fashion bloggers have managed to create such an impact on their audience that they succeeded in generating new ways of promoting and presenting fashion. By using their own voice and fashion knowledge they manage to gain an increasing position within the fashionscape, gain an important social reputation and the power to reinforce a whole system. By interacting with their readers they manage to generate discussions concerning style, lifestyle and fashion design and influence the buying behavior of their readers. The study also reveals the importance of a personal approach and the power of an audience who identifies its own views, preferences, desires and needs with those of the bloggers they follow. It seems that what was lacking in the Romanian fashionscape was a human interaction, and for managing to generate it, the fashion blogger has the ability to function as an important social actor. Through self-discovery, a knowledge display, and product understanding, the Romanian fashion has the ability to interact with its audience and rethink its strategies in order to create a sustainable fashion system.

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Biodata



Anamaria Tomiuc is a senior lecturer at the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca, Department of Theoretical Subjects, with a PhD in visual arts. Her research has focused on interdisciplinary studies, on different subjects such as: the relationship between art and advertising, branding in the arts, audience experience with mobile technologies used in cultural institutions, digital communication and the use of social media within the cultural sphere.



Oana Stan is an online fashion editor with an educational background in Comparative Literature and Communication and Public Relations, at the „Babes Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca. Her personal fashion blog represents a collection of articles which present different aspects of the fashion industry analysed from an interdisciplinary perspective: the relationship between fashion and art, the analysis of different collections, the influence of social media on fashion, the presentation of different shifts in the current state of the fashion industry, the professional development of different Romanian designers.