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What I Wore Today: Gender, Self, and Brand Culture in the Blogosphere

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WHAT I WORE TODAY: GENDER, SELF, AND BRAND CULTURE IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

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ABSTRACT

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Drawing on qualitative research with personal style bloggers, I examine how

contemporary social conditions impact the parameters for the presentation of self in

gendered ways. I relate these changes to the struggle for recognition in the face of social

anxieties and a lack of stable referents for the self. Bloggers are encouraged to think of

themselves as brands. The discourse of self-branding promises greater control over one's

image and life chances, but the practice of presenting a cohesive self-brand to an unseen

audience destabilizes the self and increases bloggers' risk of discreditation and

invalidation. Bloggers manage their brands through the performance of microcelebrity,

whereby bloggers balance the tension between presenting a self the audience perceives as

both authentic and blog-worthy, or worthy of visibility. This reproduces inequalities, as

bloggers whose bodies are more intelligible within the field of fashion are more readily

perceived as worthy of visibility. The strategies which govern the public presentation of

self on digital platforms are emblematic of postfeminist gender politics that frame women

as ideal self-regulating, self-governing, entrepreneurial subjects. I examine how male

style bloggers perform hybrid masculinities while engaging in feminized self-work. Male

style bloggers incorporate elements of femininities and subordinated masculinities in

their performance of gender. For straight male bloggers, these hybrid masculinities

strengthen their claims to masculinity in ways which ultimately reinforce gender and

sexual differences. Ultimately, the cultural impetus toward visibility destabilizes the self

and reproduces inequalities regarding which selves are seen as worthy of being seen.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2009, fashion house Dolce and Gabbana invited several fashion bloggers to Milan

Fashion Week to sit in the front row at their spring/summer 2010 ready-to-wear show for

their DandG line. It was not the first time bloggers had been invited to a fashion week

show, but it was the first time they sat in the front row, directly next to infamous *Vogue*

editor, Anna Wintour. The bloggers sat behind podiums and were given laptops to use

during the show. Some saw this treatment as the fulfillment of the democratizing

potential of the Internet—with greater access to tools of cultural production and

dissemination like blogs, these bloggers were able to go from fashion outsiders to fashion

insiders. As fashion blogger Yvan Rodic of *Facehunter* put it, "the internet has ended the

monopoly on information by the elite… there is no more top-tier and bottom rung, no

more high-fashion vs. high street" (Berry 2010). However, others remained more cynical.

As Scott Schuman, one of the bloggers invited to the show described later, he felt as

though he was being put on display. As he remarked in an interview with *GQ*:

> "They got a humongous amount of press," Schuman says. "*Look, we brought the
> bloggers in and gave them the front row. Look at the dancing-monkey bloggers!* I
> could barely bring myself to sit down." It's true, in the picture he almost looks like
> he's trying to escape. "Like, 'Ugh, I don't want everyone looking at us.' Like, *Oh, look
> at the cute bloggers! Isn't that cute! Are they playing Angry Birds?*" [emphasis
> original] (Pappademas 2012)

Blogs are usually single-authored sites characterized by reverse chronologically

ordered posts, which most often allow for reader comments. Although blogging platforms

have existed since the late nineties (Siles 2011), blogging began to gain popularity in the

United States following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The ability of ordinary individuals to

provide up-to-the-second updates and engage in public conversation regarding the attacks

allowed them to come together and express their confusion and grief (Rosenberg 2009).

According to Nielsen, the overall number of blogs has increased from 36 million in 2006 to 181 million at the end of 2011 (NMIncite 2012). With the rise of social networking and micro-blogging sites like Facebook and Twitter, blogs may be dropping in popularity, especially among teenagers (Lenhart et al. 2010). However, as the numbers indicate, blogs remain a significant region of the digital landscape.

Platforms like blogs, social networking sites like Facebook, and other content-sharing platforms like YouTube and Instagram are often categorized under the term Web 2.0, a term coined to describe a shift toward greater ease of self-publishing online (O'Reilly 2005; 2006). Proponents of Web 2.0 argue that although Internet technologies have always allowed for self-publishing, Web 2.0 platforms make self-publishing easier, decreasing barriers to communal media creation (Burgess 2006; Gillmor 2004; Harrison and Barthel 2008; Jenkins 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2006). On Web 2.0, people from all walks of life post and share audio, visual, and written content others can access at will. However, as Baym (2010) and Fuchs (2011b) note, much of Web 1.0 content was user-generated on platforms such as e-mail, forums, chatrooms, and personal websites. The most striking difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 has less to do with users' ability to create content, and more with the public perception of Web 2.0 content as more customizable and democratizing. .

Some argue that Web 2.0 represents a new democratization of culture, whereby passive consumers of information become active prosumers, creating and disseminating their own content (Burgess 2006; Gillmor 2004; Harrison and Barthel 2008; Jenkins 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2006). However, others argue that the democratizing rhetoric of Web 2.0 is little more than a smokescreen which obfuscates the structural

inequalities built into the participatory web, creating new media hierarchies (Chia 2012; Petersen 2008; Pham 2011; van Dijck 2009; van Dijck and Nieborg 2009; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008), and subjecting users to increasing levels of surveillance and tracking (Andrejevic 2004; 2007; Banet-Weiser 2012; Fuchs 2011a; 2011b; Marwick and boyd 2010).

The promise of participatory web platforms is self-determination, but the very ways we are able to self-determine are constrained. The rhetoric of empowerment surrounding participatory web cultures and UGC amounts to an entrepreneurial cyberutopianism steeped within commodity culture. We have the freedom to consume, the freedom to self-regulate, the freedom to make ourselves into ideal neoliberal subjects (Andrejevic 2004; Brown 2003; Dean 2008; Rose 1996; 1999). According to Chia (2012), "As an ecosystem of platforms, [user generated content] proffers democracy, individuation, fame, and fortune; yet for the blogging masses, it delivers hierarchy, aggregation, and obscurity" (p. 430). Although virtually anyone with Internet access can create their own media content via Web 2.0 technologies, there is no guarantee that content will reach an audience.

Early research on self-presentation and impression management on the Internet focused on the increased control afforded by online interaction in chatrooms, social virtual spaces, games, and other sites where supposedly anonymous participants can play and experiment with identity (Rheingold 1991; Surratt 1998; Turkle 1995). Some argue that the tendency for identity play was overstated in this early research (Robinson 2007; Snee 2008), but regardless of any initial explanatory power these theories may have had, they no longer make sense Furthermore, distinguishing between the self and interaction

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online and face-to-face, a common distinction in earlier work, cannot properly account for the way individuals experience themselves and their relationships (Robinson 2007). The dominant mode for digital communication today is not disembodied interaction with strangers, but rather the "public display of connection" through participatory web platforms like social networking sites, blogs, and media sharing sites (Donath and boyd 2004), which reflects broader cultural changes through which the public display of self becomes a form of productive labor and a means for achieving success (Arvidsson 2005; Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2012; Banet-Weiser 2012; Chen 2013; Hearn 2008b; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Marwick 2014; Marwick and boyd 2010; Senft 2008; 2013; van Dijck 2013; Wee and Brooks 2010).

Personal style blogs arose in this context. These blogs are spaces where individuals—mostly, but not exclusively, young women and girls—post pictures of their daily outfits, fashion inspiration, and occasional musings about their lives and the world around them. Through personal blogs and digital self-portraiture, individuals produce continuous, carefully crafted narratives about the self (Chin and Halls 2008; Chittenden 2010; Rocamora 2011; Walker 2005). As Rocamora (2011) notes, personal style and fashion blogs combine old and new technologies of the self, thus offering a unique site for exploring shifting processes of self-presentation and self-construction. Dress and appearance have always acted as significant sites for the presentation of self (Davis 1992; Goffman 1959; Maguire and Stanway 2008; Stone 1962), and some individuals throughout history have made efforts at documenting their dress, through drawings, photographs, or diaries (Lipovetsky 1994). However, in maintaining a personal style blog

intended for a public audience, individuals add a new dimension of visibility to this process.

Like the history of technology, the history of fashion is often written as a process of increasing democratization (Berry 2010; Davis 1992; Wilson 2003). Following this logic, personal style blogging represents the next step in the democratizing process. Here, individuals can control not only their own appearance, but the very cultural discourses which construct dress and fashion. However, if online media content is organized hierarchically, it follows that so too are the selves which arise as they engage with this content. Anyone with a camera and Internet access may start a blog, but not everyone will be treated equally by search engines, the mass media, and the fashion industry (Chia 2012; Malin 2011; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013).

As Woermann (2012) notes, much work on Web 2.0 continues to focus on the "glitzy façades" of media content and fails to engage with the processes by users create content (p. 61). However, in consuming, producing, and engaging with online media content, individuals write their very selves into being (Chia 2012; Davis 2012; Walker 2005; Woermann 2012). By focusing on the explicitly political implications of online media content, the popular discourse on blogging tends to privilege political blogs, which are disproportionately written by men (Herring et al 2004; Lenhart and Fox 2006; Pham 2010). The bias against more personal or cultural blogs reproduces a very limited definition of political participation in terms of "serious," masculine subjects like electoral politics, and ignores the political struggles people wage in more personal domains (Harris 2008; Lopez 2009; Mann 1994). In contrast to the serious work of news and political blogging, personal and cultural blogs are described as symptomatic of a shallow,

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narcissistic culture (Aboujaoude 2012; Bauerlin 2011; Carr 2011; Keen 2013; LaPorta 2009; Turkle 2011; Twenge and Campbell 2009).

As a participant at the 2005 BlogHer conference of women bloggers stated, if women "stopped blogging about themselves they could change the world" (Lopez 2009: 730). This statement makes two assumptions: first, that people who blog about themselves and their interests are necessarily self-absorbed and disengaged from the wider social world, and second, that blogging about the self has no reverberating political impact. However, the "micro-political" actions (Mann 1994) individuals enact in their day to day life may have the potential to challenge existing power structures. Harris (2008) proposed widening conceptions of political involvement to include young women's participatory web involvement. Through DIY web cultures and social networking, young women construct selves and highlight issues of importance to them. For instance, blogs offer an opportunity for young women to act as cultural producers and create alternative meanings to the culture industry. As Banet-Weiser (2004) described in her research on the popular "girl power" rhetoric on the children's cable channel Nickelodeon, commercial media visibility can be an important source of political power in a contemporary media landscape.

By "blogging about themselves," bloggers can engage with meanings of what it is to be a gendered subject. Individuals and groups who have historically been silenced and misrepresented can speak out and reach out to others, gaining visibility. Visibility is one of the necessary factors for recognition and validation of the self. However, there is a fine line between visibility and surveillance. Visibility in itself is not inherently empowering if that visibility encourages "these very same ideological structures and messages of the

media privilege a commercial context that connects social power with consumption activity." (p. 125). Furthermore, as Brighenti (2007) notes, "Visibility is a double-edged sword: it can be empowering as well as disempowering." (p. 335). Visibility can lead to social recognition and validation, but one can be too visible—placed under the microscope, subject to increased scrutiny (Foucault 1988; 2004).

We present our selves in order to elicit a desired reaction. What reactions we seek, and how we go about eliciting them is a matter governed by context-specific norms (Goffman 1955; 1959), that limit the range of potential selves we may construct. Theorists of hypermodernity have written about how the imperative for visibility—and to shape oneself in a way that others will see—imposes itself on the individual as a form of domination, replacing recognition as the primary source of self-validation, with consequences for the self (Aubert and Haroche 2011; Birman 2011; Brighenti 2007; Derber 2000; Haroche 2011; Thompson 2005; Varga 2005). Whereas recognition is rooted in an understanding of others' identities and rights as human beings (Birman 2011; Brighenti 2007; Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994), visibility refers to the quality of being seen. In a media-driven landscape, visibility is not universally granted, creating a situation of "conditional worth" (Derber 2000: 81), through which our moral rights are contingent on proving our distinctiveness (Aubert and Haroche 2011; De Gaulejac 2011).As Brighenti (2007) describes:

> As communication technologies enlarge the field of the socially visible, visibility becomes a supply and demand market. At any enlargement of the field, the question arises of what is worth being seen at which price – along with the normative question of what should and what should not be seen. These questions are never simply a technical matter: they are inherently practical and political. (Brighenti 2007: 327).

Communications technologies raise the question of who is visible, to whom, and why. Historically, women have been hyper-visible as object, but largely denied recognition as subjects and citizens (Banet-Weiser 2004; Bartky 1988; Bordo 1993; Brighenti 2007). A feminist visibility politics opens opportunities for women as subjects, but largely within the rhetoric of an entrepreneurial, neoliberal brand culture which frames the self as a source of material value (Banet-Weiser 2012; Harris 2004; Keller 2012).

The mainstreaming of self-portraiture and self-documentation seen on personal style blogs are emblematic of these cultural tensions. In recent years, scholars have begun to take notice of personal style and fashion blogging (Chittenden 2010; McQuarrie et al. 2013; Pihl 2013; Pham 2011; 2012; Rocamora 2011). To fully understand the sociological significance of personal style blogging, one must take a multi-faceted approach, examining not only the blogs themselves, but also bloggers' own interpretations of the process of self-presentation and the social norms they orient to in presenting selves to be consumed by an audience of unknown others. The current research explores the personal style blogging community in order to understand the processes whereby individuals construct a self through digital technologies, and the social and cultural norms they follow in doing so. I am interested in the parameters for self-presentation on social media platforms. Considering the debates regarding the potential of participatory web platforms to usher in a democratization of cultural production, I am especially interested in exploring how individuals use platforms like blogging, and whether blogs may offer individuals opportunities to challenge dominant cultural norms

of representability, or whether the presentation and reception of selves on personal style blogs reproduces these norms.

Research Questions

Broadly, this research seeks to explore norms of self-presentation in contemporary culture, how individuals interpret and respond to these norms, and the gendering of these norms. I have chosen to focus on personal style bloggers because they self-consciously construct themselves as objects to be consumed by an audience of unknown others, in much the same way celebrities are marketed as cultural products. In studying personal style bloggers, I asked several questions:

What motivates individuals to craft the public presentation of self for an audience of unknown others?

What are the parameters afforded bloggers' presentation of self on personal style blogs?

What kind of value do bloggers produce?

How do bloggers present themselves in gendered ways?

Theoretical Orientation

This research follows an inductive approach to the study of personal style blogs in order to explore the construction of self, authenticity, and gender in contemporary western culture. I am particularly interested in understanding how individuals negotiate a sense of self within broader cultural narratives regarding what constitutes a worthwhile

self-presentation, and how these narratives are shaped by structural inequalities. To examine the interplay between self-presentation and the cultural parameters for the presentation and reception of self, I draw on symbolic interactionism, feminist cultural studies, and theories of hypermodernity.

Symbolic interactionism and other interpretivist theories like dramaturgy allow for an understanding of the self as an emergent, ongoing, and fundamentally embodied process. For this project, I draw on Goffman's theory of dramaturgy in order to frame the process through which individuals present themselves within the situational parameters of personal style blogging. Goffman is particularly well-suited to examining the production of public persons, something which is key to a culture of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2004; Brighenti 2007; Haroche 2011; Thompson 2007). For Goffman, the self is not a given, but arises in social context. Thus, Goffman allows for a situated understanding of how individuals negotiate the self in interaction.

Interpretive theories are sometimes critiqued for lacking attention to structure. Through this research, I do not only describe the processes of self-presentation and how bloggers interpret them, but I also locate these micro-processes of self within a broader social and cultural landscape in which the self is constructed. For this, I turn to two sources: theories of hypermodernity and feminist cultural studies' treatments of postfeminist media culture.

There are a number of different names for describing contemporary western culture, although I tend to prefer hypermodernity due to what it evokes: a sped-up, exaggerated modernity untethered by traditional constraints. But with the loss of constraint, one also loses a sense of certainty and security, contributing to a new sense of

cultural anxiety. In this perspective, hypermodern individuals are not unbridled, hedonistic subjects, but self-regulating subjects, managing their anxieties by imposing what limited control they do have over themselves. I situate these changes in the cultural context of neoliberalism, through which qualities —like the self and authenticity—which were once thought to lie outside of market have become sources of material value. These changes are part of a landscape in which the drives for recognition and dignity (Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994), which form the basis of modern politics, are replaced by a drive for visibility and attention (Armitage 2001; Bauman 2000; Brighenti 2007; Charles 2009; Gottschalk 1999; 2009; Lipovetsky 2005; Redhead 2011; Thompson 2005; Virilio 2000).

McRobbie (2009) critiques theories of hypermodernity for their emphasis on institutional deregulation. However, because theories of visibility and hypermodernity are attuned to the criterion of worthy selfhood (Armitage 2001a; De Gaulejac 2011; Haroche 2011; Varga 2005; Virilio 2000), there can be an affinity between these theories and the work of feminist cultural studies. Scholars like McRobbie (1997; 2007; 2008; 2009) and Gill (2007; Gill and Scharff 2011) in particular have been central in describing the way the socioeconomic conditions of hypermodernity shape individuals into gendered subjects through the cultural discourse of postfeminism. This is not to say that individuals are passive recipients of patriarchal messages. Rather, individuals must necessarily negotiate their selves in dialogue with gendered meanings of selfhood. Power is never absolute, and individuals always have the capacity to use existing discourses in unexpected ways. Thus, although gendered discourses of the self may constrain individuals, they can always re-formulate those discourses. This research examines the processes by which individuals construct gendered selves, and how these public

representations both constitute and are constituted by existing social, cultural, and economic conditions.

Methods

To fully understand the sociological significance of personal style blogging, one must take a multi-faceted approach, examining not only the blogs themselves, but also bloggers' own interpretations of the process of self-construction. Additionally, one must locate bloggers' experiences within available discourses for self-construction. To do so, I combine participant observation, qualitative content analysis, and in-depth interviews in order to explore the selfing process in a self-promotional culture, and the way these processes are gendered.

Organization

Chapter 2 traces the literature on self and identity in contemporary western culture. I begin by describing symbolic interactionist theories of self as emerging through interaction before discussing how the self comes to be constructed as a material entity in hypermodern society. I review the literature on how digital technologies impact self-presentational strategies, and I then develop the gendered dimension of the presentation and reception of self by locating the self within the cultural discourse of postfeminism, which frames liberation and empowerment as located in individual consumer acts rather than resulting from collective political struggles. Chapter 3 outlines the methods I used in a qualitative study of personal style blogging. Those include

interviews, qualitative content analysis, and participant observation. I discuss some of the debates regarding digital ethnography, as well as issues of validity and reliability in feminist research. In chapter 4, I discuss the prominence of self-branding as a set of discourses and practices of the self. I examine how individuals adopt this orientation toward the self, and how bloggers' branding practices on social media platforms impact the interaction order. In chapter 5, I examine microcelebrity as a self-presentational strategy bloggers adopt through which they treat themselves as branded goods through the performance of authenticity and blog-worthiness. I discuss how the drive for blog-worthiness reproduces existing inequalities regarding which bodies are considered worthy of visibility. In chapter 6, I delve further into the gender politics surrounding self-documentation, in particular, the experiences of men's style bloggers as they negotiate masculinity in a postfeminist cultural landscape. Lastly, in chapter 7, I summarize my findings, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this project, and suggest directions for future research.

Why Personal Style Blogs? Sociological Relevance

This research contributes to of the scholarship on the self and gender in contemporary hypermodern society. Throughout its history, sociology has been concerned with questions of the self, but with the increasing individualization (Bauman 2000; Baumeister 1986; Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002) and centrality of identity projects (Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991) which mark social life in hypermodernity, these questions have risen to an even greater significance. Thus, the implications of this research speak to more than the experiences of personal style bloggers themselves. The

self-presentational strategies they use are *emblematic* of more general social shifts in the presentation and reception of the self. Since beginning this research, practices of public self-documentation, like those performed by personal style bloggers, have become more mainstream with the rise of "selfie culture" (Doy 2004; Vivenne and Burgess 2013; Walker 2005; Wendt 2015). Rather than impose meaning on public self-documentation, I locate these practices within broader cultural shifts and try to understand how people construct meaning surrounding the ways they present themselves.

Personal style blogs are sites on which individuals present a self they fashion through consumer products to a broad, unseen audience. The purpose of starting a personal style blog is to draw an audience to validate the self. These blogs arise in a sociohistorical context in which past referents for the self, such as family, religion, place, and occupation, have lost their significance, leaving individuals with a lack of social recognition. As Mead (1934), social recognition is the basis for the development of the self. Lacking social recognition, individuals seek visibility. However, while recognition is based on universal modern ideals (Taylor 1994), the injunction to visibility makes worth contingent on standing out in a crowd and drawing the gaze of the other. The consequence for invisibility is the denial of subjectivity. As Derber (2000) describes, "The 'invisible' person does not gain even the minimum attention required to feel that his or her presence has been acknowledged or established." (p. 15). Lacking visibility, the individual is in a state of non-existence. Aubert and Haroche (2011) argue the "injunction to visibility" has intensified since the 1960s, and particularly the 1990s, "with the development of mass media and omnipresent technologies that induce to a continuous and unlimited production of the self." (p. 7). By examining how bloggers seek to gain an

audience and keep their attention, and what the implications are for bloggers who fail to find an audience, I am able to speak to how broader cultural changes impact individuals' experience of the self.

Recent books, such as Banet-Weiser's (2012) *Authentic TM* and Marwick's (2014) *Status Update* have explored the rise of self-branding as a self-presentational strategy, and the role of participatory media platforms in popularizing these techniques. Research by Davis (2010; 2012; 2014), Hogan (2010), and Senft (2008; 2013) further examines these dynamics. Harris (2003; 2008), Banet-Weiser (2012), Gill (2007), and McRobbie (1997; 2007; 2008; 2009), among others, have approached branding as a feminized self-presentational strategy. However, these scholars have not thoroughly explored branded masculinities. I build on work by Bridges (2014) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) on hybrid masculinities to examine the implications of branding and the drive for visibility on constructions of masculinity.

CHAPTER 2: SELF BRANDING AND AUTHENTICITY IN HYPERMODERNITY

As academics attempted to explain the increasing ubiquity of communications technologies, much of the resulting discourse focused on the liberatory potentialities of online communication (Anderson 2005; Featherstone 2000; Levy 1997; 2001). Many of those theories were based on early empirical studies of online communities (Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). This pioneering work examined some of the earliest online communities, which were populated by largely homogenous groups of technically proficient early (and male) adapters. These researchers approached virtual spaces as alternate realities, divorced from the embodied experiences of the material world (Robinson and Schulz 2009).

However, others critiqued these theories, arguing that since "nobody lives only in cyberspace" (Kendall 1999; McGerty 2000), the online/offline epistemological split is a false dichotomy (McGerty 2000; Gies 2008; Kendall 1996; 2002; Magnet 2007; O'Brien 1996; Sunden 2001). Furthermore, discourses framing disembodiment as desirable and liberatory reproduce a Cartesian duality which divorces identity and self from lived experience (Boler 2007; Bordo 1993; De Lauretis 1987; Grosz 1994). Today, theories of the online self divorced from material reality no longer make sense. The dominant mode for online communication is not disembodied interaction with strangers, but rather the "public display of connection" through participatory web platforms like social networking sites, blogs, and media sharing sites (Donath and boyd 2004). Participatory web platforms promote the maintenance of public connections with others, be they friends, family, or a public audience, thus blurring the boundaries between online and offline selves even further.

In response to these changes in individuals' use of the Internet, some scholars focused on the potential of participatory web cultures to democratize culture (Harris 2008; Harrison and Barthel 2008). In the more recent Web 2.0 scholarship, the user is not just conceptualized as a consumer of culture, but also as a producer who actively creates and distributes original content (Beer and Burrows 2010; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). This model is especially salient in the case of bloggers. Supposedly, any literate person with Internet access can start a blog, and by posting quality content, a blogger can garner significant audiences, thus ending "monopolies of public expression" (Levy 2001: 224).

However, although technologies offer the potential to engage with and challenge the meanings circulated by traditional media sources, there is no guarantee that that potential will be realized (Man 1994). Some suggest that the rhetoric regarding the democratizing potential of Web 2.0 is little more than a distraction from the neoliberal underpinnings of participatory web cultures (Chia 2012; van Dijck 2009, Andrejevic 2004; 2007). According to Pham (2011: 6), "while the Internet may democratize communication systems, it is a democracy of popularity rather than equitability." As political scientist Jodi Dean also notes, "Rather than a rhizomatic structure where any one point is as likely to be reached as any other, what we have on the web are situations of massive inequality, massive differentials of scales where some nodes get tons of hits and the vast majority get almost none" (Soong 2009).

As Markham also remarks, online, "I am responded to, therefore I am" (2005: 795). To have one's self validated, it must first stand out in a densely populated web, but in a culturally intelligible way. Increasingly, users accomplish this through the practice of

self-branding, whereby they attempt to establish control over their self-presentation and the reception by the audience for material gain (Arvidsson 2005; Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Marwick 2010; Wee and Brooks 2010). The literature presented in this chapter situates self-branding discourses and practices within the contemporary moment that produced them and discusses branding's implications for how we conceptualize and perform self and authenticity.

Self and Identity in Contemporary Western Culture

The idea of the individualized self is a relatively recent concept in Western thought (Elias [1938] 1978; Foucault 1977; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Lipovetsky 1994; Rose 1996; Taylor 1992; 1994; Trilling 1972). Prior to the dominance of individual Subjectivity as the only Subjectivity, individuals derived a sense of identity from broad social categories such as profession, geographical location, gender, social class, and religion (Baumeister 1986). According to Trilling (1972), private, individualized Subjectivity came to prominence along with the rise of the nation state and the growing significance of society as an abstract ideal. In response, people began to conceptualize the individual self as a private, inner space apart from the collective.

As Mead (1934: 140) notes, "The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience." Although often envisioned as a core being or essence that belongs to the individual, the social constructedness of the very concept of individual Subjectivity speaks to the self's standing as a social structure (Mead 1934). In contrast to the abstract, universal "transcendental self" articulated in Descartes's axiom, "I think, therefore I am," the

pragmatist philosophical roots of symbolic interaction situate the self within its social existence (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 19). For a pragmatist like William James, the self is not a core being, but a point of reference "that arises and gets designated within the course of embodied interaction" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 24). The conceptualization of the self as embodied and experiential, which James referred to as the empirical self, emphasized the mundane, collaborative quality of the self, thus re-framing the self from a transcendental universal to a lived experience.

Drawing on James' concept of the empirical self, Cooley and Mead both constructed theories that emphasized the interactional processes that give rise of the self. Cooley emphasized the reflective, social aspect of the empirical self, locating it in self-feeling. As Mead (1934) saw it, in locating the self in self-feeling, Cooley was in danger of reifying it as an instinctive core. In contrast, Mead theorized cognition as the locus of the self, because it is only through cognition that we are able to take the attitude of others through our capacity for symbolic thought. Thus, the self only arises through the process of communication. Consciousness itself is not a sufficient criterion for self—it is only when consciousness is embedded in lived experience that we are able to take the self as an object.

The work of pragmatist thinkers like James, Cooley, and Mead would form the backbone of symbolic interactionism. Blumer emphasized the emergent quality of social life through interaction, and positioned the self as the agent of this process. The self thus only becomes meaningful in interaction, and this process of meaning-making is continuous. As such, the self cannot be taken for granted or reified as something we *have*. Rather, symbolic interactionism posits the self as fluid, contextual, negotiated, and

emerging through interaction (Robinson 2007). However, this approach does not mean

that symbolic interactionism is astructural. Individuals shape society and culture as they

are shaped by society and culture (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1962). Thus, the

self arises not only through everyday interactions, but also in dialogue with existing

discourses of what actually constitutes a self. Therefore, to understand the self, one must

look at individuals' interactions, interpretations, and experiences with self, but also at the

historically and culturally available narratives of self which they use to construct a sense

of self.

According to Gergen (1991), since the 19th century, we have relied primarily on

two discourses of self: the romantic self and the rational self (see also Turner 1976).

Romantics saw the Enlightenment emphasis on the observable and the use of rational,

scientific methods as unsuited to understanding human nature. For them, human nature

was neither rational nor observable—it was an emotional, spontaneous, visceral,

irrational, poetic, moral core which set the self apart. However, this focus on the

unknowable was not conducive to life in an increasingly rationalized industrial society.

Thus, the modernist, rational self based on Enlightenment values began to overshadow

the romantic self. In contrast to the romantic self, which was unstable and prone to peaks

of emotion, the modernist self was genuine, trustworthy, predictable, consistent across

time and situations, and inwardly motivated. The modernist self was in control of itself,

autonomous, capable of directing itself toward desired ends (Gergen 1991; Turner 1976).

Both the romantic and modernist discourses reified the self. In both, what set

human beings apart was the possession of a core self. However, postmodern theories of

the self suggested these vocabularies did not fit the social and cultural realities of a

postmodern society (Featherstone 1991; Gergen 1991; Meyrowitz 1985). Some scholars

suggested that the development of transportation and communications technologies over

the past century brought about shifts in how we conceive of the self (Gergen 1991;

Meyrowitz 1985; Poster 1995; Surratt 2001). Media and transportation technologies

widened our access to information and our concept of available possibilities, increasing

our familiarity with the other (Meyrowitz 1985; Gergen 1991). If the self was the product

of reflection and decision making, the proliferation of often contradictory moral choices

in the postmodern moment threatened to destabilize it. According to Gergen (1991), the

postmodern self is relational and fragmented. This relational self comes into being as we

are exposed to more frames of reference, and subsequently, more potential ways of being.

In any given situation, we can refer to any number of possible selves/others. As a result,

our sense of self becomes fragmented into situated other-directed postmodern selfhood.

The postmodern self is without grounding—it emerges out of relations with real or

imagined/simulated others. In this context, to continue to examine the self as a stable

thing no longer makes sense, because the self is not a thing, but a changing combination

of fragments.

However, some have critiqued these theories on the grounds that they overstate

what is new about the self in postmodernism (Callero 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2000;

Robinson 2007; Surratt 2001; Taylor 1992). For Holstein and Gubrium (2000), that the

self appears more fragmented does not mean that it is entirely without grounding. They

propose that the self in postmodern culture is much the same as the self at any other time:

a moral core which makes choices in the context of institutional constraints. The number

of choices one must make may have multiplied, but that represents a quantitative change,

not a qualitative one. As Giddens (1991) argues, in a post-traditional society, individuals can no longer rely on traditional, stable markers of identity. However, the weakening of structural sources of self and identity does not entail a lack of self. When the self is freed from traditional constraints, individuals must engage in a constant process of reflexive identity construction. Thus, the self may be less stable, but the process of reflexivity entails a self-concept upon which to reflect. We continue to refer to and act upon our selves as a core, and so long as this is true, the theoretical and methodological tools of interpretative sociology will continue to be relevant in how we conceptualize and study the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Robinson 2007).

Still others take issue with the ontological basis of postmodernism (Beck 1992; Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003; Giddens 1991; Lipovetsky 1994; 2004; Redhead 2011; Sebastian 2009). For scholars of late modernity, high modernity, or hypermodernity, there is nothing about the contemporary cultural moment that marks it as operating under a different logic than the logic of modernity. According to French theorist Gilles Lipovetsky (2004), postmodernity represented a specific historic moment, signaling a break with modernity, but not its end. Rather, for Lipovetsky, postmodernity was merely a transition to our current cultural era, the era of hypermodernity, a modernity freed of the last vestiges of traditionalism. If modernity was marked by individualization, secularization, rationalization, capitalism, and the shift from the local to the national, the current historical moment could be seen as a "modernization of modern society" (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003: 1). As such, I argue that the parameters for self presentation and self construction in contemporary culture are more in line with Lipovetsky's paradoxical hypermodern self than Gergen's relational postmodern self.

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Hypermodernism and Neoliberalism

If postmodernity was marked by the rise of consumer society, mass media, fragmentation, and the fall of grand narratives, hypermodernity accelerates these trends. As Armitage (2001) succinctly defines it, "Hypermodernity refers to any contemporary social process containing a greater than usual amount of various elements relating to the quality or state of modernity" (p. 132). While theorists differ on the terminology used to describe the contemporary cultural moment (hypermodernity, late modernity, liquid modernity, reflexive modernity), they agree on the characteristics that define it: It is a time of anxiety, risk, uncertainty, insecurity, instability, simultaneity, convergence, acceleration, excess, and individualization (Armitage 2001; Bauman 2000; Charles 2009; Gottschalk 1999; 2009; Redhead 2011; Sebastian 2009; Virilio 2000). Hypermodern culture is characterized by "galloping commercialization, economic deregulation, and technical and scientific developments being unleashed with effects that are heavy with threats as well as promises" (Lipovetsky 2004: 31). It is a moment, as Virilio (2000) emphasizes, in which the world is shrinking and time is accelerating, a moment of constant change with no particular ends in sight. As Bauman (2000) remarks, "A hundred years ago 'to be modern' meant to chase 'the final state of perfection'—now it means an infinity of improvement, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired" (p. 82).

What seems at first glance to be a lack of meaning under hypermodernity is actually meaning which exists at a different, more global scale (Sanchez 2010), undermining and disintegrating the institutional boundaries that gave life meaning and direction under earlier forms of modernity. For Lipovetsky (1994; 2004), as individuals are less constrained by traditional social norms, they are less constrained in their

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construction of self. The state recedes into the background as the individual and corporations are exalted for their commitment to the logic of narrow self-interest (Lipovetsky 2004).

The political orientation of hypermodernity is rooted in modernist politics of recognition. Drawing on Hegel and Mead, Honneth (1995) argues that the "struggle for recognition" is one of the primary motors of social conflict and change. Recognition entails an understanding of an individuals' humanity, unique identity, and legal rights. However, the basis of recognition changes over time. As Taylor (1994) explains, in pre-modern societies, recognition was a given because identities were connected to hierarchical social roles. This changed in the late 18th century with ideas of equal dignity and the rise of the "ethic of authenticity" (Taylor 1992; Trilling 1972). Identity no longer came from without, but from within—it needed to be worked at, discovered, and uncovered. This made identity more fragile—although identity became more individualized, it still needed to be recognized by others in order to be validated due to the dialogical—not monological—quality of human life (Brighenti 2007; Mead 1934; Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994; Thompson 2005). Taylor (1994) describes how recognition drives contemporary politics, particularly identity politics which focus on the individual right to equal dignity and equal humanity:

> The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 1994: 25).

With the speeding up of social life and the falling away of traditional sources of identity, the politics of recognition are superseded by the politics of visibility (Aubert and Haroche

2011; Birman 2011; Charles 2009; De Gaulejac 2011; Haroche 2011). While visibility is

necessary for recognition, one can be visible without being recognized. Visibility can

lead to recognition, fragility and a loss of control. As Foucault (1988; 2004) notes,

visibility leads to increased discipline. This tension—between recognition as a unique

individual with certain legal rights on one hand and surveillance and domination on the

other—lies at the heart of the politics of visibility, and serves the basis for Lipovetsky's

"paradoxical self."

Diagnosing a culture characterized by depthlessness, hyperconsumption,

hypercompetitiveness, and hyperindividualism, Lipovetsky describes a paradoxical

impetus toward greater self-control. Whereas modernity is described as forward-looking,

both postmodern and hypermodern theories of culture are often defined in part by a

presentist temporality due to the acceleration of time and the collapse of tradition and

ideals of progress (Armitage 2001; Bauman 2000; Brighenti 2007; Charles 2009;

Gottschalk 1999; 2009; Lipovetsky 2005; Redhead 2011; Thompson 2005; Virilio 2000).

However, as Lipovetsky (2005) describes it, hypermodernism is not about the present,

but about "the prevention of problems" (p. 47). In the face of anxieties and a lack of

certainty, fears of the future are absorbed into the present. Because an individualized

society is necessarily saturated by anxiety due to the lack of certainty, the hypermodern

actor is pulled in two directions—on one side, toward the incitement to enjoy life; on the

other, toward the need to preemptively protect oneself from the insecurities of

contemporary society (Charles 2009; Lipovetsky 2005; Varga 2005). Thus, Lipovetsky

argues that we are in the midst of a post-disciplinary society where the authority of the

state wanes and is replaced by a condition of self-discipline brought about in part by the

uncertainty of the future. In the face of meaninglessness, people still seek order, structure, and control.

Lipovetsky suggests that hypermodern culture was brought about in part by the shifts of neoliberalism. The term neoliberalism refers to an economic philosophy originally articulated by figures like Hayek and Friedman (Brown 2003; Dean 2008; Harvey 2005). It rose in prominence as a result of the economic crisis in the 1970s, which displaced Keynesian economic policies that saw state regulation as key to maintaining a strong economy (Harvey 2005). As Harvey (2005) defines it, neoliberalism is:

> …a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (p. 2).

However, others have argued that neoliberalism cannot be understood in purely economic and political terms, but as a cultural force as well, constituting a self-governing citizen subject with a moral obligation toward continual self-development (Brown 2003; Rose 1996; 1999). Lipovetsky's hypermodern subject as a self-interested *homo oeconomicus* fits the ideal neoliberal subject, "acting and reacting in accordance with various economic incentives and disincentives" (Dean 2008: 49). Reaching similar conclusions as Lipovetsky, Dean draws on Hardt and Negri's assertion that neoliberalism represents a shift from disciplinary society, where control is achieved through traditional institutions such as religion, family, and the state, to a society of self-control characterized by injunctions toward enjoyment and excess:

> …rather than providing symbolically anchored identities (structured according to conventions of gender, race, work, and national citizenship) neoliberalism offers its subjects imaginary injunctions to develop our creative potential and cultivate our individuality, injunctions supported by capitalism's provision of the ever new

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experiences and accessories we use to perform this self-fashioning – *I must be fit; I must be stylish; I must realize my dreams. I must because I can – everyone wins. If I don't, not only am I a loser, but I am not a person at all; I am not part of everyone* [emphasis original]. Neoliberal subjects are expected to, enjoined to, have a good time, have it all, be happy, fit, and fulfilled (Dean 2008: 62).

If one does not consume, one may miss out on some opportunity to express some aspect of one's identity, but if one consumes too much, one becomes morally suspect (Dean 2008). Thus, hypermodern individuals are pulled in two opposing directions: on the one hand, toward the incitement to consume as a way of expressing and valorizing the self; on the other hand, toward the incitement to remain disciplined, productive, self-controlled and self-motivated. Therefore, as Larner notes (2000), "neoliberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance" (p. 12).

As Brown (2003) defines it, governmentality is "a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one which produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social" (p. 2). Foucault (1988) conceived of governmentality as the discursive practices through which the state shapes individual citizens in ways which further its goals. Under neoliberalism, the state has not entirely receded from view. Rather, its new role is its subservience to the needs of the market. Thus, while the citizen subject has been displaced by the entrepreneurial subject, the latter is not under any less control. Neoliberalism creates self-regulating citizens, complicit in their own governance, thus shaping the strategies through which they can express themselves and interact interpersonally (Andrejevic 2004; 2007; Foucault 1988; Fuchs 2011a; 2011b; Lair et al. 2005; Sender 2006).

Foucault defines power as the ability to direct another's actions. Power is not a quality one either has or does not have, but a condition which arises within a complex network of relationships. That one may have fewer options for directing others' actions,

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does not mean that one is lacking in power (Foucault 1988). The capacity for agency lies in using existing discourses in new and unexpected ways (Foucault et al. 1988). The fantasy of free trade ensures that the best will come out on top, so long as they are unconstrained. When individuals fail, they need only be patient, or else make some internal changes to better align themselves with the demands of neoliberalism. However, the fantasy of free trade is just that—a fantasy which obscures the reality that free trade amongst equals does not exist within a neoliberal economic structure (Armitage 2001a, 2001b; Dean 2008).

The emphasis on individualization, entrepreneurialism, and self-discipline characterizing contemporary society represents an internalization of the market logic. However, as Lipovetsky (1994; 2004) and others (Dean 2008; Rose 1996; 1999) have noted, the ideal consumer subject of neoliberalism is a reflexive, choosing subject. While choices may be directed toward serving the needs of neoliberalism, they can never be fully rationalized. Authenticity is a major source of value, which brands try to cultivate in order to foster trust and lead consumers to co-create value. Thus, neoliberalism demands space for authenticity and truth, because it is exactly these relationships which produce value, although in the depthless culture of hypermodernity, the concepts lose their previous meaning as they are appropriated for commercial purposes (Andrejevic 2004; Banet-Weiser 2012; Dean 2008; Lamla 2009; Marwick 2014; Marwick and boyd 2010; Senft 2008; 2013; Taylor 1992).

Wee and Brooks (2010) suggest that in a society that valorizes the self-determined, entrepreneurial subject, reflexivity itself becomes a commodity and a source of cultural capital. Though reflexivity may be an increasingly common requirement to

participate intelligently in contemporary society, it is not a resource granted equally to all people. Those who lack in reflexivity, who are not appropriately self-regulating, are seen as lacking and in need of expert help. Through the neoliberal project, one is expected to uncover a true, authentic self which aligns with white, upwardly-mobile middle class capitalist and hedonist cultural norms. According to such discourses, individuals who do not live up to these expectations are prompted to explain their fate as resulting from personal rather than systemic failure (Brown 2003; Dean 2008; Harris 2004; Wee and Brooks 2010).

McGuigan (2009) identifies this contemporary "spirit of capitalism" as far more authoritarian and violent than previous iterations. The power of neoliberalism is seductive rather than coercive, making individuals complicit in their submission (Andrejevic 2004; 2008; Hearn 2008a). The decree of, "You must!" has been replaced with the suggestion that, "You may!" (Zizek 1999). It integrates counter-cultural critiques of capitalism, which call for individualism, representation, and freedom of expression, promising a more democratic culture, while simultaneously displacing social critiques rooted in material inequalities. For Brown (2003), "A fully realized neo-liberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded, indeed it would barely exist as a public. The body politic ceases to be a body but is, rather, a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers . . . which is, of course, exactly the way voters are addressed in most American campaign discourse" (p. 15). However, others have argued that rather than flatten civic engagement, this dynamic provides a new opportunity for engagement that is motivated by the struggle/imperative for visibility and recognition (Bauman 2000; Brighenti 2007; Charles 2009; De Gaulejac 2011; Haroche 2011; Honneth 1995; Lamla 2009; Lipovetsky 1994;

2004; Sanchez 2010; Taylor 1992; 1994; Thompson 2005; Varga 2005). While this argument may be overly-optimistic, and may divert attention from a social structural critique of neoliberalism, the point remains that the logic of neoliberalism continues to allow for pockets of resistance.

The conditions characterizing the hypermodern moment produce a particular set of parameters for self-construction. As Gill and Scharff (2011) put it, "Neoliberalism is a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising" (p. 5). However, the qualities of the ideal neoliberal subject are not gender neutral. As Gill and Scharff note:

> To a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism *is always already gendered* [emphasis original], and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?" (Gill and Scharff 2011: 7).

As Gill and Scharff (2011) and others have argued (Banet-Weiser 2012; Butler 2013; Gill 2007; Keller 2012; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009), the gender politics of neoliberalism are the politics of postfeminsm, as both neoliberalism and postfeminism value the individual over the collective, disregard social constraints, and construct an active, free-choosing subject. In the following section, I delve further into the affinities between neoliberalism and the postfeminist cultural sensibility, and assess the implications of both for the individual.

The Postfeminist Sensibility

The concept of postfeminism has been used in several different and often ill-defined ways—as a theoretical stance, as a backlash against feminism, as a historical

moment. Defining postfeminism as a sensibility "positions postfeminism as an object of critical analysis" (Gill and Scharff 2011: 4), opening opportunities to explore the content of postfeminist culture. Gill (2007) outlines elements of postfeminist sensibility characterized by particular cultural themes. Those include:

> …the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and disciplining; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (p. 149).

De Lauretis (1987) suggests that the goal of feminism is to see beyond institutional discourses in an attempt to dismantle an oppositional construction of gender. However, when the boundaries of gender are threatened, dominant groups may appropriate tools of deconstruction in order to reconstruct these boundaries. The postfeminist sensibility is one example of this process. It cannot be understood as a straightforward backlash against feminism. Rather, it trades on feminist ideas, but in such a way that feminism is ultimately repudiated. McRobbie (2007; 2009) refers to this as the "postfeminist masquerade," the popular idea that the goals of feminism have been achieved, that gender equality has already been won, and that feminists have no legitimate complaints and are merely misguided, dour, and angry (Lazar 2009). Postfeminism frames women's empowerment through their capacity to engage in highly commodified, hyperindividualized projects of the self. Empowerment is thus construed as an individual achievement, rather than as a political goal. As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006: 260) put it, "post-feminism boldly claims that women possess active political agency and Subjectivity, yet the primary place in which this agency is

recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture."

Several authors (Banet-Weiser 2012; Butler 2013; Gill 2007; Gill and Scharff 2011; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009) relate postfeminism to the political and economic shifts of neoliberalism, which constructs a rational, autonomous, entrepreneurial actor in the face of increasing privatization, deregulation, and withdrawal of the state. Both neoliberalism and postfeminism value the individual over the collective. Both construct an active, free-choosing subject, and both position citizenship in terms of consumption. As historically docile bodies, women have been under greater pressure to self-regulate (Bartky 1988; Black and Sharma 2001; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003; Gimlin 2002; Kwan and Trautner 2009; Tseëlon 1997). Thus, Gill and Scharff (2011) suggest that the postfeminist subject is an ideal self-regulating, neo-liberal subject. While she sees the body as the source of feminine power and control, this control is illusory. What the postfeminist subject has the power to do is to place herself under a constant process of self-policing (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gill 2007). However, because this regulatory stance toward the body is constructed as a matter of individual choice, it seems inherently empowering. Because women's self-regulation is ostensibly undertaken freely, their actions are thus free from political scrutiny (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Tasker and Negra 2007). As consumers, women choose to conform to a "postfeminist masquerade" of feminine beauty, but since it is framed as a choice—even an ironic choice—its role in reifying an image of women as sexually unthreatening goes unquestioned (Lazar 2006; 2009; 2011; McRobbie 2007; 2008).

These postfeminist discourses rely on a valorization of visibility, reducing women's liberation to issues of representation and consumer choice (Banet-Weiser 2007). Doing so ignores the material implications of consumer acts and reduces freedom to the freedom to buy. Visibility itself does not guarantee rights and recognition. Women have historically been hyper-visible as symbolic objects, but not necessarily as subjects and citizens. Thus, visibility can serve as a source of women's oppression (Bartky 1988; Black and Sharma 2001; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003; Tseëlon 1997). However, because postfeminism is steeped within a discourse of autonomy and choice, it offers the potential to realize De Lauretis's (1987) feminist goals of dismantling gender. For Genz (2006), while often conservative, postfeminism can also be progressive, offering women the potential to seek alternative meanings of femininity. Research on camgirls (Senft 2008), burlesque performers (Ferreday 2008), alternative porn models (Attwood 2011), fashion bloggers (Rocamora 2011), and girls' use of social media (Harris 2008) suggests that not only does a postfeminist sensibility offer opportunities for women and girls to construct alternative femininities, but that through the use of technologies of self-surveillance, women and girls are able to challenge the duality between subject and object. Women may be subjecting themselves to the gaze, but on their own terms, creating a cultural product of value and forging relationships with their audience and with other girls and women.

However, not all people are equally visible in society. As McRobbie (2009) notes, the ideal postfeminist subject is a white, heterosexual, young, middle class woman. Because of this subject's privileged position, her engagement with discourses of self-surveillance, self-discipline, and bodily display are read as evidence of her "can-do"

entrepreneurial spirit (Banet-Weiser 2012; Harris 2004). In contrast, women at the

margins of representability are faced with a double-edged sword. On one hand, they face

blame for their own invisibility due to their inability to live up to the postfeminist moral

impetus of "glamourous individuality" (McRobbie 2009: 125). On the other, their

attempts to promote themselves are read not as evidence of agency, but of pathology and

immorality (Banet-Weiser 2012; Bettie 2003; Harris 2004). However, that postfeminist

discourse may privilege a white, heterosexual, middle class woman does not preclude

women of color and working class women from participating and being represented in

postfeminist culture (Banet-Weiser 2007; Butler 2013; Keller 2012; Springer 2007).

Analysts conclude that postfeminist culture reproduces whiteness as a norm

(McRobbie 2009; Springer 2007). However, as Butler (2013) argues, in focusing on the

representations and experiences of white women, many scholarly analyses of

postfeminist culture ignore the experiences of women of color, reproducing whiteness as

a normative position. For Butler, postfeminism as a cultural sensibility does privilege

whiteness, but many women of color actively participate in postfeminist culture,

including postfeminist icons like Nicki Minaj (Butler 2013) and Tyra Banks (2007).

However, within this culture, women of color are made to "know their place" as

commodities. Postfeminism is thus connected with postracialism. Just as the postfeminist

sensibility dismisses the political significance of gender, postracialism dismisses the

political significance of race, while capitalizing on the otherness of nonwhites. These

postracial politics frame race as a commodified identity category individuals express

through consumer goods. But, Butler argues, just as the potential for agency within

postfeminist discourse opens up opportunities to disrupt norms of gender, it also offers

opportunities to disrupt norms of whiteness (Butler 2013).

However, the potential for subversion and disruption lies not only in the type of

performances allowed within a particular context, but in the way those performances are

interpreted and understood. As Brickell (2005) argues, drawing on a dramaturgical

reinterpretation of Butler (1990), subversion is a process of meaning-making and

negotiation over the definition of the situation. In constructing a self, we rely on socially

available meanings and discourses. Subversion entails we attempt to use these resources

to create new Subjectivities and new ways of being, expanding frames, and resisting the

power structures which shape social relations. However, in order to maintain order,

interactants are liable to reinterpret actions within the frames of the situation. Because

Goffman is attentive to the way self arises in interaction, he also notes the way

subversion and parody can be misinterpreted. Thus, to be subversive, an act must

necessarily be interpreted within a subversive frame. Furthermore, just because these

actions are potentially subversive does not mean that they are necessarily used in that

way (Harris 2008). Work on women and young girls' use of Web 2.0 platforms suggest

that they provide opportunities to experiment, explore, and broadcast self, positioning

women as cultural creators (Atwood 2011; Banet-Weiser 2012; Ferreday 2008; Harris

2004; Senft 2008). However, through the act of constructing a spectacular self to be

displayed to an audience of unknown others, one subjects oneself to practices of

surveillance and discipline which situate performances within normative frameworks

(Banet-Weiser 2012; Harris 2004). The subversive potential of the use of Web 2.0

platforms does not lie within the act itself, but within the relationship between the actor

and the audience. While Web 2.0 platforms can grant visibility, they place the actor under a panoptic scope. Thus, an analysis of postfeminist culture and participatory web cultures must examine both individuals' use of participatory web platforms, as well as the reception of their self-performance in order to evaluate the subversive potential of a given act.

While analyses of the postfeminist sensibility address how the changing gender order impacts women and girls, most fail to address the question of what kinds of masculinities arise within a neoliberal consumer culture, including what might constitute a postfeminist masculinity. As the body becomes more significant as a site for engaging in identity projects, self-aestheticization is increasingly normalized for men as a form of self-expression (Alexander 2003; Bordo 1999; Edwards 1997; Nixon 1996; Ricciardelli, Chow, and White 2010). Although there is some burgeoning scholarly work on the construction of these consumer masculinities and the way they relate to the logic of neoliberalism, there is a paucity of scholarship discussing how shifts in normative constructions of masculinity relate to the hegemonic gender order. If the ideal subject of neoliberalism is the postfeminist woman, one must examine the role of masculinities in postfeminism in order to understand the way contemporary culture structures gender.

According to Banet-Weiser (2012), the postfeminist cultural sensibility combines with technologies of self-surveillance to promote the moral duty to construct oneself as a brand. As Marwick (2014) described it, "Self-branding is primarily a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual. It is a set of practices and a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity that can tempt a potential employer," the "strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others" (p. 166). Although

the postfeminist subject is defined in large part by her role in the consumer economy, she

is neither reduced to a passive consumer, nor is she defined as an active producer. She is

both, incorporating consumer products into her own identity project, or self-brand. As

Banet-Weiser (2012) notes:

> The ideals shaping the discursive and ideological space of the Internet—freedom,
> equality, innovation, entrepreneurship—are the same discourses that provide the
> logic for girls' self-branding, a practice that situates girls ever more securely into
> the norms and values of hegemonic gendered consumer culture, as they also
> reshape definitions of a new, interactive femininity. (p. 69).

In the following section, I discuss the meaning of branding as a set of discourses and

practices for presenting the self, and how self-branding is gendered.

Self-Branding and Self-Governance

In the traditional sense, branding refers to the process of linking cultural meanings

to products and services, thus creating a personal relationship between individuals and

consumer items (Arvidsson 2005; Banet-Weiser 2012). However, increasingly, branding

refers not only to products and services, but to individuals as well (Arvidsson 2005;

Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008b; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Marwick 2010; Wee

and Brooks 2010). As Hearn (2008b) defines it:

> Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and
> meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from
> the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function
> of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and,
> potentially, material profit. (p. 140)

In other words, the discourse and practice of self-branding turns the self into a

source of material value, turning Giddens's (1991) "self reflexive project of the self" into

an explicit form of labor. Hearn suggests that within the branding discourse "success is

dependent, not upon specific skills or motivation, but on the glossy packaging of the self and the unrelenting pursuit of attention" (Hearn 2008b: 205). One's worth is based upon one's capacity to draw an audience and develop a positive reputation with it (Hearn 2010). Thus, one must stand out, but in a way that enhances one's perceived value.

The idea of self-promotion is not new. Even though he did not call it branding, Gergen (1991) remarked that increased media scrutiny encourages branding practices in public figures. Wernick (1991) also remarked on the increasing ubiquity of what he called promotional culture. For him, consumer objects have value as commodities, and as promotional tools, as something which grants value to the company which made them. From the early days of capitalism, the production of promotional signs has been entrenched in the production of commodities. This process has only become more important with the proliferation of media, extending to the point that "…the range of cultural phenomena which, at least as one of their functions, serve to communicate a promotional message has become, today, virtually co-extensive with our produced social world" (Wernick 1991: 182). Promotional culture is not merely about commercial messages and consumer products. Under promotional culture, the individual laborer makes him or herself into a commodity to be promoted and sold, and that, "...from dating and clothes shopping to attending a job interview, virtually everyone is involved in the self-promotionalism which overlays such practices in the microsphere of everyday life" (Wernick 1991: 192). Similarly, Thompson (2005) discussed how communication media like television and radio ushered in a "'the society of self disclosure': a society in which it was possible and, indeed, increasingly common for political leaders and other individuals to appear before distant audiences and lay bare some aspect of their self or

their personal life." (p. 38). Tisseron (2011) contrasts our desire to keep some aspects of our inner lives hidden (intimacy), with this new injunction to reveal parts of his or her private self for public validation (extimacy). The desire for extimacy is connected to the intensification of the pursuit of attention and visibility in contemporary social life (Aubert and Haroche 2011; Derber 2000).

But while self-promotion may not be new, the singular focus on the self as a brand from which to extract material value is new, and increasingly ubiquitous (Marwick 2014). Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) trace the self-branding discourse to the late-nineties self-help management literature. Self-branding rhetoric offers "overt invitation to self-commodification" (Lair et al. 2005: 308). Rather than promoting one's skills and abilities, one is encouraged to see oneself as a unique, notable, authentic product, and find ways to communicate this to others. However, as Banet-Weiser notes, branding goes beyond commodification to the "self-conscious role of individual labor in the production of the self-brand" (p. 60). Through self-disclosure and backstage access, the individual creates a sense of authenticity, which constitutes the value of the self-brand. Branding can thus be understood as a presentation strategy that draws on interactional norms in order to capitalize upon authenticity (Banet-Weiser 2012; Du Gay 1996; Lair et al. 2005, Marwick 2014; Wee and Brooks 2010).

The self-branding phenomenon did not arise by accident. With increasing individualization and a loss of stability, self-branding offers the allure of control while literally drawing on the American mythos of the self-made person. Through branding, one literally makes oneself, gaining control over the responses of others (Lair et al. 2005; Wee and Brooks 2010). Research on individuals working in highly competitive, "cool"

industries suggests that they frame branding as a way of ensuring they maintain an edge

over the competition (Marwick 2014; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Wissinger 2009).

However, the promise of increased control is ultimately illusory. The discourse of self-

branding directs self-presentation in a very specific, instrumental way, requiring constant

self-reflection and evaluation in constructing a "strong brand" which will be consistent

throughout all interactions (Banet-Weiser 2012; Marwick 2014; Marwick and boyd 2010;

Wee and Brooks 2010). As Wee and Brooks (2010) note:

> In the case of personal branding strategies, the actor is expected to present a self
> that is constantly working on itself, to better itself and its own relationships with
> others, all the while demonstrating that its behaviours are reflections of an
> authentically unique personality. (p. 56)

It is not enough to have the right skills, or even the right look, but to live the right

way (Lipovetsky 2004; Wissinger 2005). As branding practices are institutionalized and

one's material and moral success begin to depend upon seeing oneself as a brand, other

options for self-presentation begin to lose credence (Lair et al. 2005; Marwick 2014).

Web 2.0 platforms have not created the necessity for self-commodification and

competition, but they do capitalize on the cultural anxieties of neoliberalism and the

culture of visibility, extending the cultural impetus for self-branding from the labor

market into all arenas of social life. Andrejevic (2004) refers to this as "productive

surveillance," through which people come to see surveillance as a pleasurable, desirable

way to express themselves and potentially achieve fame and fortune in the process. The

promise of participatory web platforms is that they allow virtually anyone to become a

public figure, just by virtue of "being themselves" in front of a mass and largely

anonymous and unresponsive audience (Chin and Hills 2008; Ferris 2010; Hearn 2008;

Marwick and boyd 2010; 2011; Senft 2008). By voluntarily broadcasting information

about oneself, one ostensibly gains control, not only over oneself and one's labor, as the

corporate branding literature of the nineties promised, but also over the production

process. As Andrejevic (2004) puts it, "The possibility of total surveillance is portrayed

as power sharing: by providing information about ourselves, we supply valuable inputs to

the production process and thereby help to shape it" (p. 6). However, while the branding

discourse promises control, the persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability of

the networked self-brand destabilizes the process of impression management, increasing

the risk of discreditation to—and irrelevance of—the self (Baym and boyd 2012; boyd

2014; Tisseron 2011). De Gaulejac (2011: 256) highlights the threat of surveillance

inherent in visibility:

> The contemporary subject faces a permanent tension. On one hand, s/he must
> accomplish epic feats in order to be recognized, to surpass his/her own limits, to
> meet the requirement of "always more," and to conform to the ideological tenets
> of the "self-realization" ideology—all conditions that exacerbate his/her desire for
> visibility. On the other, s/he must escape from the traps of virtuality, of the
> ephemeral, of insignificance, of the "always more" prompted by his/her
> wandering imagination, to establish some kind of consistency, a genuine
> autonomy, a raison d'etre. The subject emerges by creating a life that makes sense
> to him/her and others.

As William James ([1890] 1990:294) notes, "a man has as many social selves as there are

individuals who recognize him and that carry an image of him in their minds." However,

within the discourse of self-branding, one is encouraged to treat the self as a unified core

(Van Dijck 2013). All the "social selves" James refers to are to be directed toward

strengthening the brand. Goffman compares impression management to "successfully

staging a character" (1959: 208). However, as Goffman notes, the process of impression

management requires actors to control the information that may discredit the characters

they stage. The discourse of the "strong brand" decontextualizes the presentation of self.

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The expectation of consistency actually grants the branded actor less control over the self by privileging one self-presentation over all others.

As Trevino (2003) notes, critics of Goffman claim that his vision of actors is overly cynical. However, it is just this quality that makes dramaturgical theory so well-suited to examining the self-branding. The discourse of self-branding frames the interaction instrumentally, as a way to increase the value of one's self-brand. In order to do so, one must give the impression that one's brand is unique, noteworthy, and, above all, authentic. According to some critics of contemporary culture, this commodification of authenticity has led to an "alleged crisis of (in)authenticity" (Vannini and Williams 2009: 1). From this perspective, conflicting demands on the self, including demands that the self become a source of economic value, threaten the grounds on which authenticity is based. As Wernick (1991: 193) asks, "If social survival, let alone competitive success, depends on continual, audience-oriented, self-staging, what are we behind the mask?" However, others suggest that in brand culture, authenticity may actually take on greater significance, even as it takes on a different form (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lamla 2009; Roberts 2007). In the following section, I will discuss how self-branding impacts the meanings of authenticity.

Authenticity and Self-Branding

Branding as a marketing practice refers to the process of attempting to inscribe products with resonant meaning (Hearn 2008b). But as Banet-Weiser (2012: 4) notes, "Branding in our era has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations." Brands have little to do

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with the actual goods being sold, and much more to do with the systems of meanings which consumers construct around them (Arvidsson 2005). Brands create relationships, narratives, and experiences that consumers internalize into their daily lives. A brand is not merely a commodity, but a context for living. Thus, "authentic" spaces, including the self, are colonized by capitalist logic and practices. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, authenticity is a more significant part of the way people live their lives than ever before: A valuable brand is an authentic brand.

The concept of authenticity is used across the social sciences in a number of different ways, and is sometimes equated with sincerity. While there is no general theory of authenticity with regards to the self, most working definitions propose authenticity as an emotional, self-reflective experience which encapsulates both the knowledge of what it is to be true to oneself and the subjective experience of being true or untrue to that self (Erickson 1995; Franzese 2009; Vannini 2006; Vannini and Franzese 2008). However, although individuals experience authenticity as a feeling toward the self, Mead (1934) notes that the self never develops in isolation. Rather, the self is always constructed in dialogue with generalized others. Through this dialogue, the individual comes to internalize others' views and expectations.

Authenticity as a concept is relatively recent. As Taylor (1991) explains, it stems from the Enlightenment's valorization of the self-determining individual. In contrast to the pre-modern self, which is largely predetermined by social location in a rigidly hierarchical social system, the modern self emerges through its relations with others, which necessarily grants the right of dignity, recognition, and freedom of choice to others as well. For Trilling (1972), authenticity must be distinguished from sincerity. Trilling

defines sincerity as "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (p. 2). It is to avoid

falsehood to others by being true to oneself. Thus, sincerity is inherently other-directed—

to know oneself is a means to avoiding falsehood rather than an end in itself. As Trilling

saw it, the other-directedness of sincerity lead to its downfall as a moral imperative. If we

are true to ourselves so as to avoid falsehood to others, can we really be true to ourselves?

In contrast, authenticity "is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being"

(Trilling 1972: 93). To know oneself is an end in itself, regardless of what that self may

be. However, the authentic self requires some greater meaning in order to be intelligible;

otherwise its choices will do nothing to reaffirm it. Because the self develops in

interaction, the experience of being true to that self can only take shape in dialogue with

others.

Authenticity has historically been constructed as self-directed, thus obscuring its

social constructedness. From this view, commodification and commercialization

represent an encroachment on the self, and a loss of authenticity, because

commodification is necessarily other-directed, aimed at pleasing people to achieve a

particular end (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lamla 2009). However, in contemporary brand

culture, spaces, such as the self, that were once thought to be authentic are now being

defined by commercial logic (Banet-Weiser 2012; Lamla 2009; Marwick 2014). Seeing

commodification as a threat to authenticity reifies the idea of a core, true self outside the

realm of social construction (Bruner 1994). However, authenticity itself is a social

construction (Banet-Weiser 2012; Bruner 1994; Grazian 2003; 2008; Marwick 2014;

Rose and Wood 2005; Taylor 1992; Trilling 1972). Thus, as Gubrium and Holstein

(2009) suggest, scholars should examine authenticity as a quality which individuals

construct within situated contexts, rather than something individuals bring with them to interactions, or as a standard which individuals do or do not fulfill. Although Goffman did not write explicitly about authenticity, his work on the presentation of self points to the social constructedness of authenticity (1959). For Goffman, the audience evaluates some performances as more authentic than others. However, this evaluation is not based on any inherent qualities of the performer, but simply on whether or not the performance seems believable (Trevino 2003). Focusing on the processes by which individuals construct and evaluate authentic selves allows us to examine the rising significance of the self-brand as a cultural product.

To work at authenticity, one must be aware of the parameters which construct ideas of genuineness. These parameters give narratives of what it means to be authentic or inauthentic, providing vocabularies and guidelines for evaluating authenticity. Because the standards of authenticity are not fixed, we need to explore authenticity as an embedded practice, uncovering the "what" and the "how" of individuals' everyday performances of authenticity (Bruner 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The practices of constructing and evaluating authenticity will necessarily be collective processes. To understand the meaning of authenticity in brand culture, one must look behind the content of the brand, and examine the interactions which make that content meaningful, and the conventions which shape how individuals construct meaning.

Summary

Theories of digital selves have tended to focus on what was unique about the enactment of self on digital platforms. However, as digital technologies become more

integrated into day-to-day life, the boundaries between online and offline have blurred in such a way that those distinctions no longer make sense. Rather, blogs and other participatory web platforms are not unique because they are online, but because the parameters for performing successful selves in these settings arise from broader social and cultural shifts which change the conception and enactment of selves. Gergen (1991) argues that in postmodernity, the self has become more relational and diffuse. However, the postmodern, relational self is contradicted by the discourse of self-branding that constructs the self as an authentic core (the "strong brand") from which one can extract material value. In contrast to Gergen's situated, relational self, the self-brand bears a greater resemblance to the paradoxical, hypermodern self of Lipovetsky (2004). Although ostensibly freed from institutional constraints, individuals institute a regimen self-governance so as to avert the risk endemic to a neoliberal economic context.

If one assumes that authenticity is purely self-directed, the idea of an authentic self-brand seems like a contradiction. A market-oriented self would appear inherently other-directed, and thus inauthentic. However, because the self only develops in dialogue with others, the authentic self is always other-directed. Thus, from an interactionist perspective, authenticity cannot be studied as a quality one brings to interactions, but an interactional achievement. Within brand culture, authenticity may therefore actually take on greater significance, as a brands' value lies in its capacity to develop an authentic relationship with an audience. However, in using participatory web platforms to promote one's self-brand, one divorces the performance of self from situational context, which introduces some challenges to the process of impression management.

Although many theorists of contemporary western culture emphasize the tendency toward deinstitutionalization and individualization, institutional categories such as race, class, and gender continue to have a reverberating structuring impact in shaping the way individuals' self-presentations are performed and evaluated. Theorists of postfeminist culture are attentive to the way gender structures self and interaction within contemporary western culture. Although the "postfeminist sensibility" trades on a pseudo-feminist discourse of individual choice and empowerment, it frames that empowerment within an individualized consumerist narrative that continues to emphasize gender differences. However, much of the work on postfeminist culture eschews an intersectional approach by focusing on a white, heterosexual, middle class postfeminist subject, largely ignoring the experiences of those who fall outside those parameters. Furthermore, there is little work that examines the relationship between the postfeminist sensibility and masculinity.

The contribution of this research is to locate individuals' situated performances of self on social media platforms in the broader cultural conditions which shape the parameters for acceptable self-presentations. In particular, I am interested in how these cultural shifts shape the parameters for self-presentation. What does it mean to brand oneself? How is it accomplished, and how does branding impact the interaction order? What implications does self-branding have on the individual, and how are these processes? In the following chapter, I outline my methods for exploring these questions.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

I based this project on data from semi-structured interviews, qualitative content analysis, and participant observation with personal style bloggers. I first became aware of personal style blogging in 2008, when I read a feature about it in *BUST Magazine*. As someone who enjoyed style but was critical of the fashion industry, I was attracted to personal style blogs for being fashion outsiders, and I began reading a number of them on a regular basis. However, from the beginning I always had questions about personal style blogging. These questions did not vanish as I began posting my own outfit of the day pictures to photo groups, or as I started a personal style blog with a close friend of mine. In my time reading blogs, speaking with bloggers, and attending blogging conferences, I found a number of people echoing a similar sentiment: something seemed a little strange and a little narcissistic about staging photo shoots in order to document one's daily outfit, taking dozens of pictures, editing them, and posting them on a public blog in the hopes that an audience of strangers will look at, enjoy, and comment on one's outfit.

I was curious as to what exactly the appeal of blogging was, both to bloggers and their readers, but more than that, I wanted to know the reasons behind blogs and the implications of such gendered self-presentations. Personal style bloggers were not the disembodied virtual subjects of the more utopian approaches to Internet studies. Personal style bloggers, most of whom were young women and girls, were presenting themselves as embodied selves to be consumed by an audience, and they were doing so in a culturally feminized way. However, although these bloggers offered themselves in part as aesthetic objects to be consumed, they had control over the way they presented

themselves. For their readers, personal style bloggers' appeal was not only in the way they looked and the clothes they wore, but the personality behind the clothes.

Today, this embodied, aestheticized, documentary approach to self-presentation expands far beyond personal style blogs. Personal style blogs are not unique, but reflect broader cultural trends toward public, consumable, branded selves. This trend is documented in research on the self-branding strategies of culture industry workers (Marwick 2014; Neff et al. 2005; Wissinger 2009) and public self-documentation strategies like self-portraiture (Doy 2004; Vivenne and Burgess 2013; Walker 2005; Wendt 2015). In conducting this research, I sought to explore questions of authenticity, self, and gender in contemporary western culture. More specifically, I wished to examine how the public performance of self on digital platforms impacts the parameters for self presentation, and how these selves are evaluated. I also explored how bloggers negotiate their presentation of self in dialogue with traditional fashion media and cultural norms equating appearance and femininity.

To explore these questions, I collected qualitative data on personal style blogging. Whereas many digital and virtual ethnographies focus on virtual communities, this research is more akin to an examination of what Howard Becker (1984) referred to as a social world. The term "community" implies a group of interconnected members who regularly constitute and reconstitute the boundaries of the group through their interactions with each other. In contrast, Becker's concept of social worlds illuminates the fact that culture can be created by disparate, disconnected individuals, whose efforts collude in the construction of symbolic meaning. Although bloggers may be acting largely in solitary, they are connected to other bloggers via cultural norms, economic demands, and

technological constraints which shape the way bloggers create blogs and their audience receives them.

Digital Ethnography

I initially conceptualized this project as a virtual ethnography. The object of study for virtual ethnography is the virtual community, an online space where people communicate and socialize (Hine 2000). However, as I continued my research, it became clear that the social world of personal style blogging could not be encapsulated by virtual ethnography. Kozinets (2010) distinguishes between "online communities" and "communities online." In research on online communities, questions of online identity and computer mediated communication are central to the research project—for instance, Correll's (1995) study of the Lesbian Café, a lesbian BBS, in which she created a typology of group members and discussed how they created a sense of space and community with only text and without sharing physical space, or Kendall's (2002) research on identity and interaction in a virtual text-based environment. Research on communities online, in contrast, examine social phenomena that exist apart from the virtual setting. The selfing processes of personal style bloggers are shaped by social networking platforms, but they cannot be reduced to the blog itself.

Furthermore, as digital technologies permeate our everyday life, it makes less sense to differentiate between online and offline ethnographic methods (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Garcia et al. 2009; Robinson and Schulz 2011). What is called "virtual" ethnography is just an ethnography of individuals' use of the internet. Murthy (2011) distinguishes between digital ethnography and virtual ethnography. Whereas early virtual

ethnographies tended to focus on discrete online communities (Correll 1995; Gottschalk 2010; Hine 2000; Kendall 2002), digital ethnography is more responsive to the blurring of boundaries between online and offline worlds. When appropriate to the setting, digital methods may be used as a form of ethnographic data collection. Digital ethnography and more traditional face-to-face ethnographic methods can thus be used to complement one another, particularly as communications technologies become more ingrained in our daily lives. In studying exclusively online settings, one may choose to only use digital methods. However, few communities and social worlds exist only online, and mediated communication usually complements, not replaces, face-to-face interaction (Boden and Molotch 1994). This is as true of the social world of personal style blogging as any other. Although the cultural products bloggers produce are digital, and their interactions with other bloggers and readers often take place on digital platforms, bloggers also get together at sponsored events, conferences, or simply as friends. Thus, I found it necessary to study not only the cultural products bloggers produced, but to attend events that bloggers attended.

Digital and virtual ethnographies have been the subject of a significant amount of debate. Early discussions of virtual social research in the early 90s questioned how social virtual spaces actually were and if they were indeed viable environments for study (Kendall 2004; LeBesco 2004). In addition, the idea of virtual ethnography called into question one of the basic tenets of ethnographic research, which required the researcher to share physical space with his or her subjects. For example, in presenting her research on a test-based social Multi-User Dungeon, or MUD, Kendall (2004) came across many critics doubting her claims based on the virtual nature of the community of study, the

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reason being that if the space did not exist physically, how could she be assured any of what happened within it was "real"? Some even went so far as to question whether the community she studied existed at all. However, as Wiles, Crow, and Pain (2011) argue, many of the supposed innovations in digital ethnography are merely new spins on old ways of conducting ethnography, such as interviewing community members, analyzing significant texts, and participating in and observing interactions. Similarly, while digital and virtual ethnography may pose unique challenges to conducting research, many of the issues which arise in conducting ethnography online are similar to those which would arise in any ethnographic undertaking, such as questions of the power dynamic between researchers and subjects (Robinson and Schulz 2011; Gottschalk 2010).

As several scholars have noted, one of the major challenges of conducting digital or virtual ethnography is the sheer amount of data which the research can potentially analyze (Clegg-Smith 2004; Kendall 2004; LeBesco 2004; Markham 2005). As of October 5, 2013, the website Independent Fashion Bloggers, or IFB, claimed over 52,000 members. Not all IFB members are personal style bloggers and not all personal style bloggers are members of IFB, but this number reflects the volume of independently operating fashion bloggers. Considering that some bloggers update five or more times per week over the course of several years, that constitutes an enormous number of blog posts. In addition, over the past five years, bloggers have begun to integrate the use of different social media platforms with their blogs. It is common for an individual to operate regularly-updated, interrelated accounts on Blogger, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest, resulting in an unwieldy amount of data. Although I followed a

number of bloggers across various social networking sites, I decided to focus my analysis on blogs and their comments, only using other material illustratively.

<center>*Analysis and Validity*</center>

I began my research by conducting interviews with bloggers, and I started analyzing my data after my first few interviews. To analyze my data, I used the tools of analytic induction. I started by open coding my interview transcripts and field notes in Microsoft Word, going through line-by-line and typing out initial codes in the margins of the document. These initial codes touched on what participants were accomplishing through their words, the assumptions they made, and what they took for granted as they made sense of and explained their own experiences. I then went through and completed more focused coding, collapsing codes into more general concepts which clarified the initial codes. I used color-coded Excel files to visualize which codes were most prominent, and wrote out descriptions of what these codes meant. I used these concepts to orient my participant observation, which allowed me to check codes against different settings. Having developed a coding frame, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of blog posts and comments. I saved PDFs of blog posts onto Nvivo. As I saved posts, I categorized by type and recorded notes on each.

As a feminist ethnographer, I do not hold my work to positivist standards of validity. I do not intend for this research to capture any sort of objective truth, because objectivity is an obfuscatory concept which serves to hide the constructedness of knowledge (Denzin 2002; Haraway 1988; Olesen 2003). Using the standards of transgressive validity, the researcher recognizes the constructed nature of the social world

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and the impossibility of Truthfully representing the subject, recognizing her role as a maker-of-meaning alongside research participants. In recognizing the partiality of her perspective, the researcher actively seeks alternative perspectives and interpretations and reflects on her own role within the research process. Rather than establish myself as an infallible interpreter of reality, I recognize the partiality of my viewpoint as a researcher. I found that the process of coding, re-coding, memoing, and diagraming my data allowed me to be more immersed in the analytic process. Analysis was an on-going part of the data collection process, thus leading me to confront my presuppositions and expectations throughout my research. This process gave my research an additional level of verisimilitude and transparency. In going through texts line-by-line, I was less inclined to gloss over parts of the interview which did not fit my expectations, increasing my methodological rigor and accountability to participants.

It was my experience as a reader of blogs and, for a short while, the author of a style blog of my own which led me to my research interest in the first place, as I struggled with the tension I felt between my interest in fashion and the nagging feeling that it was a waste of my time, and that there were other more "important" things I could be doing. This research was born from a desire to resolve this tension. In order to establish myself as a trustworthy interpreter, readers have a right to know how my experience has colored my interpretations. Having regularly read hundreds of blogs over a period of years, I was familiar with the norms and practices of blogging, and was able to see first-hand how they changed with time. However, as a marginal member of the blogging community, I often found myself positioned as an outsider when seeking out interviews. Living in a city far removed from any active style blogging community made

it difficult to develop relationships with bloggers, which I believe arose as a problem when I began to contact bloggers for interviews. In the following section, I further discuss my interviews with bloggers and some of the difficulties I encountered.

Interviews

To explore bloggers' experiences of self, I conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with personal style and fashion bloggers. I conducted these interviews between July 26, 2012 and October 4, 2013, when I reached the point of category saturation. Interviews typically ranged between 45 minutes and two hours. Shortly after conducting interviews, I transcribed them myself using ExpressScribe and then coded the transcripts line by line in Microsoft Word. I selected individuals who consider blogging a significant part of their lives and identity. Thus, I generally contacted bloggers who had been blogging for over a year, who tended to update their blogs on a regular basis (once or more per week), and who appeared to have significant ties to the blogging community (attending or hosting conferences, spending face-to-face time with bloggers, being featured on other blogs, etc.). Because this research is on personal style bloggers as opposed to other fashion-themed bloggers, I selected participants who blog about their own outfits at least 25% of the time. In some cases, I approached bloggers who did not fulfill all these requirements, particularly if they represented a smaller niche of bloggers, as in the case of male style bloggers, or if I felt they could elucidate a particular experience. For instance, one participant whom I met at the Independent Fashion Bloggers conference had only been blogging for two months when I interviewed her. However, her attending that conference spoke to a level of commitment to blogging, and

she had touched on several issues of importance to my research in some of the questions she posed to conference panelists.

While there are some lists of the most popular fashion blogs, there is no sampling frame of personal style blogs more generally. Bloggers post on a number of different platforms, including Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr. Blogs tend to be categorized by type, but personal style blogs may be categorized along with other fashion and lifestyle blogs. Additionally, individuals may start a blog and abandon it, or shift the focus of their blogs. Because I was specifically seeking to analyze blogs and bloggers with certain characteristics, I sought out bloggers through a mix of snowball and purposive sampling. I contacted bloggers who represented different blogging niches and different demographics, including plus size or "fatshion" or plus size bloggers, male bloggers, and bloggers of color. Ultimately, I interviewed 21 women and 9 men. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 at the time of interview, and most were 25 years old. There is little data available regarding the demographics of style and fashion bloggers in particular, but the available data suggests that the majority of bloggers are between 25 and 44 (Technorati 2011). Thirteen participants identified as people of color, and eight identified as gay or bisexual. One third of women bloggers identified as non-white, and all but three identified as straight. In contrast, half of men bloggers identified as gay, and most identified as non-white. I include more detailed demographic information in Appendix A.

I contacted most potential participants cold, without having met them or spoken with them before. I approached bloggers for interviews using a recruitment email which included details regarding the project and an explanation of why I wanted to speak to them specifically. Bloggers tend to receive a number of unsolicited, impersonal emails

from companies seeking to collaborate with them. I briefly operated a research blog and I received a number of these solicitations myself, despite my low readership and the academic emphasis of my blog. Knowing this, I personalized the emails to make it clear I was specifically interested in speaking with that particular blogger. If they responded, I emailed them an electronic version of the Informed Consent form and asked them to indicate consent by replying back with their full name, the date, and whether or not they consented to having their blog quoted in oral and written presentations of the research.

I decided to keep the identities of the bloggers I spoke to confidential. Because they were, to one degree or another, public figures, I wanted them to feel that they could answer in ways that might potentially contradict their public image. This was an especially salient concern when I first began conducting interviews, because many bloggers described keeping their blogs hidden from other arenas of their life. However, as I went on and blogging became more mainstream, more and more of the bloggers I interviewed saw less distinction between their selves on their blogs and their selves in other settings. One blogger even posted a screencap of the recruitment email I sent to him on his Tumblr and Instagram accounts, displaying it to his followers as a sign he had "made it." Knowing this, if I were to do this study over again, I would have given interviewees the option of whether or not to have their identities kept confidential.

Due to language constraints, I was limited to approaching only English-speaking bloggers. Although a number of prominent bloggers are concentrated in "fashionable" cities like New York, Los Angeles, and London, there are personal style bloggers all over the world. Thus, in most cases, conducting face-to-face interviews proved prohibitively expensive and time consuming. I did not want to conduct text-based interviews over an

online chat platform because respondents provide less information in typed interviews, even in a synchronous forms of communication like Facebook chat (Kazmer and Xie 2008; O'Connor et al. 2008). Ultimately, I conducted most interviews over the phone. Phone interviews combine the convenience of online interviewing with the increased cues and spontaneity of face-to-face interviewing. As Trier-Bienek (2011) notes, telephone interviewing is often framed as an inferior replacement for face-to-face interviews due to the lack of physical cues and a supposed difficulty in establishing rapport without physical co-presence. However, having conducted two formal face-to-face interviews in addition to phone interviews, I feel the rapport I developed in phone interviews was comparable to the rapport I developed when speaking with subjects face-to-face. Rather than see phone interviews as inferior to face-to-face interviewing, I agree with Trier-Bienek (2011), who suggests that phone interviews are a particularly participant-centered method. Phone interviews take less time than text-based interviews online, and with the prevalence of mobile phones, participants may engage in interviews from anywhere, making it easy to fit interviews into a busy schedule. For instance, I began an interview with one blogger as she drove her young children to Target, and called her later to finish the interview that evening when her husband came home and could watch their children. In addition to the benefits of phone interviews for participants, I tended to feel less nervous and more at-ease conducting interviews over the phone, which aided in establishing rapport. In some cases, bloggers specifically requested to answer questions via email. I encouraged bloggers to engage in phone interviews, both because I experienced a high level of attrition in email interviews and because the data collected in email interviews lacked the richness of that collected in phone interviews,

although bloggers gave similar responses. However, if this was the only way a blogger would consent to an interview, I agreed. Of the four bloggers who requested filling out a questionnaire, only one completed it and sent it back to me.

O'Connor et al. (2008) notes that one of the disadvantages of contacting participants via email is how easily potential participants can ignore or withdraw from the interview process, leading to low response rates and high levels of attrition. I contacted 77 bloggers and ultimately interviewed 30, for a response rate of 39%. Men were far less likely to respond to requests for interviews than women were—I ultimately interviewed 31% of the men I emailed, as opposed to 49% of the women. Butera (2006) noted similar difficulties in recruiting men for a study on friendship. As one potential explanation, she suggested that men may be reluctant to participate in research on "unmasculine" subjects. Style blogging may potentially be seen as contaminating masculinity, but because the men I contacted formulated their digital identities around style and fashion, I do not think this was the primary difficulty. Butera suggested that men may be less inclined to volunteer their time for activities which do not help them achieve goals which are in keeping with hegemonic masculinity. Compared with the women I interviewed, the men I spoke with were less likely to discuss their blogging as a way of making friends and connecting with others and more likely to emphasize their blogs as a springboard for creative and employment opportunities. One participant compared his blog to a résumé and saw the interview as further evidence of his success. I believe male bloggers responded less frequently to my interview requests because they were less likely to see interview requests as helping them achieve their goals.

Furthermore, because there are fewer men engaging in personal style blogging, it is easier for men to gain prominence as personal style bloggers than it is for women. Many of the men I contacted were well-known bloggers. As Ortner (2010) notes in describing the difficulties of conducting an ethnography of Hollywood elites, gaining access to powerful people can be difficult. Participants need to have an interest in granting access to the ethnographer: either due to feelings of pragmatic interest, or as a matter of intellectual curiosity. I found this to be the case with my participants. Most bloggers I interviewed found my research intellectually interesting or self-validating. Several bloggers I interviewed had an overriding goal or mission they wished to promote through their blog, and saw my research as a means of promoting that goal. Several had a background in the social sciences. Others saw my research interest as a validation for blogging and their own blog. I suspect that prominent professional bloggers likely did not need my help in accomplishing their goals or validating their actions. Thus, their only real motivation could be intellectual interest, which had to be strong for them to volunteer time from a busy schedule to speak with an unknown graduate student. Even in cases when participants referred me to a prominent blogger, I found difficulty recruiting them for an interview.

In the tradition of active interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; 1997), I approached interviews as a collaborative process of knowledge production between me and my research participants. Although I began interviews with a set of questions and prompts, I used these as a way to guide the conversation rather than proscribe the flow of the interview. As I interviewed more bloggers, and as the norms of personal style blogging shifted and changed with time, I changed my interview script to reflect the

issues bloggers told me were important. Rather than framing the interview as a means of excavating some sort of core truth, active interviewing asks that interviewers analyze interviews in the same way as any other social interaction, remaining attentive to how the relationship between interviewer and interviewee shapes the resultant narrative. I found the relationship between my participants and me, and the way participants defined the situation, to have a striking impact on the way the interview unfolded. More well-known bloggers, who were perhaps used to being interviewed for fashion publications and websites, tended to give shorter answers, go on fewer tangents, and ask that certain information be "off the record." In contrast, bloggers with smaller followings and "hobby bloggers" who did not wish to blog professionally tended to be more open.

Because the bloggers I interviewed were public figures, many were used to being interviewed for blogs, fashion websites, and fashion publications, and were comfortable with their remarks being attributed to them. However, as I spoke with more bloggers, it became clear that while they saw the personae presented on their blogs as an expression of themselves, for many it was only a particular version of themselves. Although their blogs were intended to be seen by the public, they still tried to maintain some distinction between the person they were on their blog and the person they were in other parts of their life. Thus, I have made every effort to maintain the confidentiality of all of my interview participants, referring to them by pseudonyms and avoiding disclosing information which may connect them directly to their blogs.

Content Analysis

In addition to interviewing bloggers, I included a qualitative content analysis of 1068 blog posts from 26 blogs. I included a list of the blogs in my content analysis in Appendix B. Because I wanted to be able to observe how the practices of blogging changed over time, I sampled all blog posts from each blog published during the randomly selected months of December 2011, August 2012, and March 2013. I have included a list of the blogs in my sample in Appendix B. Twenty-four of the blogs I included in the analysis are single-authored personal style blogs. Additionally, I included the fashion blogging resource blog Independent Fashion Bloggers and the anti-fan blog Get Off My Internets [sic] to get a better sense of the context in which bloggers are writing and publishing their blogs.

I conducted a purposive sample of blogs, which I selected using the same criteria I used for selecting interviewees. In the case of the content analysis, I tended to include blogs which bloggers identified as significant during interviews or conversations. Not all the blogs I analyzed were in existence at all three periods of data collection, reflecting the recent growth in the number of blogs and the short lives of some blogs. Analyzing blog posts themselves allowed me to compare and contrast how bloggers framed the process of self-presentation and negotiation on blogs to their actual practices, and the way they presented themselves to their public audience.

Much existing research on blogs has focused on online personal diaries (Hookway 2008). For Hookway (2008), these diaries provide a site for researchers to examine the unselfconscious manifestations of the workings of a person's mind. While the blogs he analyzed were public, and thus intended for an audience, they were anonymous, and thus more candid than other public performances of self. However, the blogs I studied were

not anonymous—rather, they were clearly connected to bloggers' offline identities through names, photographs, the disclosure of identifying personal information, and links to social media accounts associated with their real identity. As several researchers have noted (boyd 2010; Davis 2014; Donath and boyd 2004; van Dijck 2013; Zhao, Gramsuck, and Martin 2008) , this shift—from anonymous online identities to nonymous online identities, which are connected to offline identities—reflects a change from digital interfaces as sites of self-expression to sites of self-promotion. Because I am interested in these shifts in orientations toward self and identity and the way selves play out across digital interfaces, studying personal style blogs is ideal. Additionally, it allows me to examine not only how bloggers write about their blogging, but what they actually do on blogs, and how commenters react to them. Some researchers have debated the publicness of blogs and the ethics of using blogs in social research (Clegg-Smith 2004; Lee, Fielding, and Blank 2008). Although personal blogs may be publicly accessible, they are not intended to be saved, pored over, and written about at length by social science researchers. However, the debate regarding the line between private and public is not unique to online space (Waskul and Douglass 1996). Because personal style bloggers clearly present themselves as cultural objects to be consumed by a broad audience, I treated their not as personal diaries, but as public documents, and I treat the bloggers behind these blogs as public figures.

Participant Observation

In addition to interviews and content analysis, I also engaged in some face-to-face and virtual observation of blogging conferences and events. Earlier virtual ethnographies

focused on discrete online communities, such as a chat room or message board, or virtual worlds like Second Life (Gottschalk 2010; Hine 2000; Kendall 2002). There has been some debate regarding whether or not virtual ethnography can appropriately be combined with more traditional, face-to-face ethnography. As Hine (2000) argued, if one wants to study the social processes of online communities, they would be best understood using online methods. However, distinguishing so clearly between participants' online and offline experiences creates a false dichotomy which does not account for the interplay between individuals' online and offline experiences. Few communities exist only on a single, discrete, online site (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Kozinets 2010; Garcia et al. 2009; Lee, Fielding, and Blank 2008; Robinson and Schulz 2009).

Personal style blogging straddles the boundaries between virtuality and embodiment by digitally showcasing the dressed, aestheticized body. However, beyond that, bloggers do not only interact online, but connect at informal gatherings, sponsored events, conferences, and fashion weeks. Thus, I felt it was important to conduct face-to-face participant observation at some of these events to gain a fuller sense of the world of personal style blogging. Early on as I began the interview process, I spoke with a few bloggers scattered throughout the Bay Area. One of them organized regular vintage sales and suggested I may want to come and conduct some observations. I travelled to San Francisco in 2012 and spent the evening with several bloggers and their friends at a vintage clothing sale. Additionally, I travelled to New York to attend the Independent Fashion Bloggers' blogging conference held alongside New York Fashion Week.

The atmospheres at the vintage clothing sale and the blogging conference were very different, and reflected two different orientations toward blogging. The vintage sale

was held at a gallery space/concert venue/club in the gentrifying Mission neighborhood in San Francisco, and the attendees were mostly young, white, urban hipsters, sporting tattoos, cool haircuts, and a lot of polyester. The space was small, and the sale itself was informal. Although the vendors made a living selling vintage clothing, the sale seemed primarily like an excuse to spend time with friends and meet new ones while drinking and trying on clothes.

In contrast to the more community-oriented clothing sale, the organizers of the Independent Fashion Bloggers Conference marketed the event as a professional development opportunity. Independent Fashion Bloggers, or IFB, is a website founded in 2007 whose goal is to offer community and resources for fashion bloggers ("About"). Although it is no longer the only fashion blogging conference, it was the first to exclusively target amateur fashion bloggers. The first IFB conference was held during New York Fashion Week in February, 2010. A second conference followed that September during the spring shows. I observed the next three IFB conferences over a live video stream. However, while these observations were valuable, I wanted to get a sense of what it was like to attend one of these conferences in-person, and to talk with some bloggers about their experiences. In February 2013, I travelled to New York to attend the IFB conference, which was held in the Altman Building in Manhattan on February 6 and 7, 2013.

Most of the attendees were white women in their twenties and early thirties. Of approximately 400 in attendance, I can recall seeing fewer than a dozen women who could be described as "plus-size," and only a few who looked to be over a size six. I did not see anyone who looked non-normatively gendered in any way—barely any women

even had short hair. Everyone was stylishly dressed in the trends of February 2013—a woman passing by as we waited for the doors to open stopped to ask if we were lining up for a sample sale. Throughout a series of panels, corporate brand PR representatives, social media experts, and professional bloggers spoke to attendees on topics like how to best use social media "to cultivate a loyal and engaged following without ever losing your voice," how to appeal to corporate brands, and "the secrets of blogging longevity." The neophyte bloggers in attendance provided a captive audience for two days of pep talks and advertising. Each panel was sponsored by a different company like the shopping website Beso and the public relations firm Bollare. On both days of the conference, a successful entrepreneur gave a keynote speech about their brand while audience members live-tweeted the event. The wrist bands we were given when we registered for the conference were pink hair ties from one of the conference sponsors. In one corner of the room, makeup company Bare Minerals had a space set up for attendees to get their makeup done. To the left of that was booth sponsored by Mail Chimp, a free online newsletter service. Next to that was a hair styling station sponsored by Fekkai.

I listened to and recorded the panels and keynote talks, asked panelists questions, and spoke with a number of bloggers, including three (Becky, Danielle, and Greta) whom I interviewed later on. While attending both the vintage sale and the blogging conference, I took brief notes, which I later elaborated on in my hotel room following the event. Although they were very different events, I found attendees at both were interested in my research and happy to speak to me about their experiences, even if some were a little bemused that I traveled so far to spend time with them.

At the same time as the February 2011 IFB conference, another conference was being held. INDIE: The 2011 Independent Bloggers E-Conference was put together by two bloggers as an alternative to the IFB conference for bloggers. INDIE was marketed toward bloggers who were interested in learning more about blogging but did not want to incur the expense of attending fashion week in New York. While the IFB programming seems to presume attendees are attempting to make a business out of their blogs, the INDIE program appears tailored to a less professionally-minded audience. Topics covered at INDIE include using social networking sites like Facebook to promote one's blog, as well as tips on layout design and photo editing. I took field notes during live chats and as the conference founders posted content. I later saved PDFs of the posts using Nvivo, which I analyzed in the same way as blog posts.

CHAPTER 4: BLOGGING THE BRANDED SELF: THE PRESENTATION OF SELF IN HYPERMODERNITY

As Chia (2012) describes, at one point, personal blogging seemed antithetical to commercialization, but in the wake of brand culture, that dynamic has shifted. Throughout my research, whether or not they were professionally oriented, many bloggers tended to frame their practices as branding—a performance, through which the actor comes to see the self as a product to be marketed. While self-branding can refer to a way of packaging and presenting an individual's professional skill set (Marwick 2014), for others, like camgirls (Senft 2008), fashion models (Wissinger 2009), reality television stars (Hearn 2008a), YouTube personalities (Chen 2013), and the personal style bloggers I studied, self-branding is a way of packaging one's self and one's lifestyle as a commodity to be consumed by an audience of unknown others. Branding discourse aligns itself with the process of self-discovery—branding is meant as a way of uncovering a true, marketable self which is consistent across interactions. However, the discourse of presenting a cohesive, consistent, authentic self-brand does not match the reality of self-monitoring, self-censoring, and self-surveillance through which bloggers brand themselves. The tension characterizes the hypermodern imperative toward visibility (Bauman 2000; Brighenti 2007; Charles 2009; De Gaulejac 2011; Haroche 2011; Honneth 1995; Lamla 2009; Lipovetsky 1994; 2004; Sanchez 2010; Taylor 1992; 1994; Thompson 2005; Varga 2005).

On the surface, it is easy to look at self-branding cynically. As several scholars have described, corporations like Facebook and Google capitalize on even mundane forms of interaction and self-presentation by encouraging individuals to construct themselves as consumable objects (Andrejevic 2007; Fuchs 2011a, 2011b; Hearn 2008a;

2008b; McGuigan 2009). For many social commentators and researchers, the public

exhibition of self is evidence of a new, more narcissistic culture (Aboujaoude 2012;

Bauerlin 2011; Carr 2011; Keen 2013; LaPorta 2009; Turkle 2011; Twenge and

Campbell 2009). As one blogger, Kat, described blogging:

> …just thinking about what you have to do to make a personal style blog, you have
> to first of all, create a blog that's devoted entirely to you and what you look like,
> you have to take photos, you can fill your blog with content about you, you're
> taking photos of you, you're editing photos of you, picking photos that make you
> look good, putting them on a blog, and then writing something about you using I,
> I, I, me, me, me, all in the, you know, because you're talking about how you
> relate to this outfit because again, it's all about you, I, me. And then when—and
> then when people are commenting, after a while you start to expect people to
> comment and when they do comment they're commenting about you, so you
> begin to expect people to say things about you and it's just a very me-centered
> endeavor in every way.

However, although some may diagnose personal style blogging—among other

forms of lifestyle and self-documentation—as fundamentally narcissistic, doing so risks

overlooking the social context in which branding and public self documentation came to

prominence. Furthermore, diagnosing a person's drive for public visibility as narcissism

entails evaluating whether or not actors have a right visibility. These evaluations are

steeped in a culture in which the interests of a number of groups—women, people of

color, queer-identified individuals—are systematically devalued. Accusations of the

narcissism of self-documentation are rarely gender neutral. They rely on ideas which

frame women's practices as shallower and less valuable than men's practices (Harris

2008; Herring et al. 2004; Lopez 2009; Mann 1994).

Rather than asking whether or not blogging is narcissistic, which imposes

meaning on bloggers' actions, I find it more useful to examine the contexts in which

bloggers act and how that context shapes the way they make meaning of their actions.

With a few exceptions (Chen 2014; Marwick 2014) little research examines self-branding

from the perspective of those branding themselves. In this chapter, I examine the value of bloggers' self-brands, how bloggers brand themselves, and how branding impacts the interaction order.

Bloggers create symbolic value by creating feelings of trust and intimacy with their audience. They foster these feelings by producing a consistent brand, and sharing personal information which aligns with that brand. However, because a blogger's audience is largely unseen, they cannot be entirely sure about who comprises their audience, which complicates their ability to meet audience expectations. As Goffman describes, the process of impression management requires actors to control the information that may discredit the characters they stage. By encouraging the "public display of connection" (Donath and boyd 2004), Web 2.0 platforms flatten the distinction between audiences, as all have access to the same information. The resulting "context collapse" destabilizes impression management, and poses new challenges to the self (boyd 2008; Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Marwick and boyd 2010).While branding discourse presumes an affinity between the self-brand and the branded individual, this is not always the case, and remaining true to the brand sometimes entails a risk of being untrue to one's subjective sense of self.

The Presentation of Self Online

As Robinson (2007) argues, symbolic interactionist theory is uniquely suited to understanding the process of constructing self online because it is sensitive to the context-dependent nature of self. One of the key tenets of symbolic interactionism is that self and identity are not things that we have, but rather ongoing accomplishments that

arise in interaction (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). As such, each person has multiple selves and identities that arise in particular interactional contexts. Goffman (1959) famously compared this process to a theatrical performance. As he suggested, social interactions include performers and audiences—individuals expressing an image of themselves or the organization they represent and those on whom these expressions are meant to impress. Social actors situate actions within a framework of meaning and interpret others' actions based on that initial "definition of the situation." Actors establish the definition of the situation and manage others' interpretations by using props, signs and symbols. Actors' actions are never inherently meaningful, and there is no guarantee that the audience will respond to the actor's performance in the desired way. The success of the performance depends on an alignment between the actor's intentions and the audience's reception, which in turn depends on the actors' capacity to keep information which may discredit their front stage performances backstage, away from the audience's attention.

In both face-to-face interaction and much of synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication, self-presentation is an unfolding performance. Actors respond to each other's cues "live" and adjust their performance accordingly. However, although bloggers and users of other social networking platforms write their own selves into existence by posting information (Donath and boyd 2004; Liu 2007), this self-presentation is more akin to a premeditated display of virtual artifacts that connote social and symbolic capital than a spontaneously unfolding social performance attuned to reacting others (Hogan 2010).

As Davis (2014) describes in her research on selfing practices on Facebook, the networked nature of the self on social media sites complicates the selfing process in three

notable ways. First, contrary to early work on virtual settings as distinct from offline ones, today there is a greater fluidity between them. Second, the audience of the networked self expects the online self-presentation to be accurate, or to correspond to an authentic self. Failure to be accurate can lead to social sanction (Ellison et al. 2008; Marwick and boyd 2010). In order to avoid sanction, users present a consistent self across platforms. Lastly, social networking sites bring together segmented networks, which makes it more difficult for individuals to manage their networks and tailor their self-presentation to their audience. In this context, individuals must carefully manage the self they present through the display of personally meaningful artifacts *before*, and not *during*, the performance, as is traditionally the case (Davis 2010; Davis 2014; Hogan 2010; Marwick and boyd 2010).

While the parameters for selfing may be different online, the objective is ultimately the same—presenting a self for the generalized other. While users seek to present a socially desirable version of the self, just as they do in any other setting, their ability to tailor their self-presentation to social context is curtailed, and the vast array of possibilities for self-presentation is also flattened to a much narrower and acceptable range—what Marwick (2014) refers to as the "safe for work" self. As research on different digital platforms, like social networking sites (boyd 2007; Liu 2007; van Dijck 2013; Zhao, Gramsuck, and Martin 2008); blogs and microblogging platforms (Hodkinson 2007; Marwick and boyd 2010; 2011); dating sites (Ellison et al. 2006); social virtual spaces (Gottschalk 2010), and personal homepages (Papacharissi 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003) find, users typically engage in highly controlled, idealized performances of self. Even individuals who intend to perform this self primarily for

friends and family recognize the possibility for a broader audience (Schau and Gilly 2003). This is not the disembodied self-play described in early postmodern accounts of online self. Users anchor the self-presentations they perform on networked platforms to offline identities by connecting their digital selves to their existing social ties, and by using digital platforms not simply for self-expression but for self-promotion as well (Van Dijck 2013; Zhao et al. 2008). Hogan (2010) reports that users perform this promotional, cohesive self, by revealing and concealing certain types of information. And as Davis (2014) also finds, individuals not only reveal and conceal, but actively construct shareable material in their performance of a self which is socially desirable and worthy of visibility.

Historically, visibility was a quality of physical co-presence, but as Thompson (2005) notes, "with the development of communication media, visibility is freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. The visibility of individuals, actions and events is severed from the sharing of a common locale" (p. 35). This echoes Meyrowitz's (1985) argument in *No Sense of Place*—that the development of communication media opens us to a larger social stage. Media can thus shift the parameters for interaction, from a (more-or-less) reciprocal event characterized by co-presence to a "mediated quasi-interaction" associated with the production and reception of cultural products. This kind of interaction is not bounded and dialogical, as it is in more mutual forms of interaction, but open-ended and monological, producing "non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance" (p. 34).

When bloggers (Hodkinson 2007), cam-girls (Senft 2008), users of Twitter (Marwick and boyd 2011), Facebook (Davis 2014); online dating sites (Ellison et al.

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2006), or any other social media produce content for an ambiguous audience, they are engaging in this kind of monological interaction. As Mead (1934) and others (Honneth 1995; Taylor 1994) note, recognition is the product of a dialogical interaction—the other sees us, and either recognizes us for whom we think we are or misrecognizes us, which then impacts the way we see ourselves. When interaction is monological, it becomes difficult to gauge how others react to us and how we should react to ourselves, as the other we imagine evaluating our actions may not actually correspond to our actual audience.

The ability to orient one's self-performance in a socially desirable way requires that control over one's audience. Gergen (1991) describes Goffman's actor as a "strategic manipulator" who relies on control over the context in which s/he performs the self. However, the technological affordances and constraints of blogs complicate individuals' ability to exercise this control. In one sense, personal style bloggers have increased control over their presentation of self. As Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005: 968) note, they express their selves through "manifest content," or impressions given rather than impressions given off. Thus, users of participatory web platforms have control in managing their self-presentation and presenting a more idealized self—for instance, posting unusually flattering photos on a dating website (Ellison et al. 2008). However, they may have little information as to who comprises their actual audience, and thus may not be fully aware of how best to present themselves to elicit the desired response (Brake 2012; Litt 2012; Marwick and boyd 2012).

We are different people to different audiences. When we know our audience and have some sense of their expectations, we can better tailor our performance. When our

presentation of self is archived and publically accessible to an unknown audience, however, we lose that control. We may consciously present an image with a particular audience in mind, but we cannot guarantee that our imagined audience is indeed our actual audience, and that either one will interpret our message as we intended (Baym and boyd 2012; Litt 2012). Although actions on participatory web platforms may be accessible to a broad audience, research suggests that users do not anticipate their behaviors will be seen by people outside of their imagined audience (Davis 2014; Marwick and boyd 2010).The publicness of participatory web platforms can lead to context collapse and an increasing risk of discreditation.

Davis and Jurgenson (2014) differentiate between two separate kinds of context collapse: context collusions and context collisions. Context collusions are an intentional collapsing of contexts. For instance, when a Facebook user accepts friend requests from an employer, a parent, and a high school friend, s/he elects to blur the boundaries between those discrete audiences. However, while users of social media invite some context collusion, in presenting themselves to a public audience, they may also face context collisions. Audiences are unintentionally combined, thereby increasing the risk of discreditation. The discourse of self-branding promises to resolve the problem of context collision by getting the individual in touch with an "authentic" self which is cohesive across platforms. As Van Dijck (2012) quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as saying:

> You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly.… Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. (p. 199)

However, this discourse does not match the reality of the situated quality of the self. In decontextualizing the self, self-branding practices on social media complicate the presentation of self. In the following section, I discuss how bloggers present "authentic" self-brands by remaining consistent to audience expectations, and how this sometimes entails they be untrue to their sense of self.

Beholden to the Brand

In my first interviews, bloggers described blogging as a way to reach out to likeminded others and to express themselves. In later interviews, however, a larger number described starting a blog expressly in order to make money. Paris, 33, began blogging in 2009 and mentored a number of up-and-coming bloggers. In recent years, she witnessed a sea change in the blogging community:

> There used to be a lot of blogs that were like, "I'm not trying to get famous, I'm just trying to show you all what I'm wearing." And so they wouldn't show their face on their blogs. But nobody does that anymore because no brand wants to work with a faceless person. (laughs) …It's just weird to me that people do that because I didn't start my blog with the intention of getting free stuff or getting paid to do things, so it's weird to me to see a blogger with maybe like, ten followers be like, "Sponsor me!" I'm like, "What the heck?"

As Paris describes, bloggers began to think of themselves as products to be marketed, and began to brand themselves accordingly. Whereas once personal style blogs were on the fringes of the fashion industry, bloggers have since become fixtures at Fashion Weeks across the globe, and bloggers are a built-in part of retail business plans. Rather than expressing one's expectations and associations for a commercial product, branding becomes a way to frame the process of self-presentation, as one comes to think of oneself as a product to be marketed.

According to branding expert William Arruda, both corporate and personal blogging unfold across three stages: extract, express, and exude (Chen 2013). First, one "extracts" what is uniquely valuable about oneself. Second, one expresses it by constructing a "personal brand statement." Third, one "exudes" the brand by promoting it and making it visible to a broad audience. Underlying this process is the expectation that the self is a source of material value, that each person has some intrinsic quality that is not only valuable, but unique, and that success is merely a matter of effectively communicating that core being to as broad an audience as possible (Marwick 2014). This approach places the onus for success and failure squarely on the shoulders of those attempting to brand themselves, and presents a contradiction for the self-brand: While it must be authentic, it is an inherently other-directed and highly controlled performance.

In order to maintain a consistent, cohesive self-brand, individuals must control the information they project to their audience. This information includes both blog content (outfits, photographic style, writing, writing style), and also design and comments. Bloggers use a particular color scheme or have regular features on their blogs in order to maintain a consistent look and feel to their blog. Emily Schumann –author of the blog *Cupcakes and Cashmere* has a weekly feature called "Five Things" in which she shares products and experiences she enjoyed during the week. Jessica Quirk, the author of the blog *What I Wore* has a feature called "Four Pins," in which she groups together four thematic images she has shared via Pinterest. For some time, Landon McGregor, author of the blog *Fashion Goggled* ended all of his post titles with an "-ed" ("summer suit-ed," "franky ocean-ed," "snapbacked-ed"). Kat tried to express her minimalist aesthetic in every aspect of her blog, including where she takes pictures:

Even in like, simple things like where I take the photos of what I'm wearing because a lot of times—sometimes a lot of thought goes into them, because I always want such a clear, simple background, so I usually try to find something that's a monochrome wall…. So even little things like that play a big part in the overall image, I guess.

Marcus considered establishing a brand by adopting a trademark style:

If I'm doing something from now on, I think like, everybody's going to see me with a tie. No matter how I want to be dressed that day, I'll find my way around it, but you have to see me with a tie. Button up, tie, and then maybe a blazer or a jacket. Maybe a varsity jacket, but a tie needs to be in the look. I feel like when I have no tie, it gets me confused with other people because other people don't use any ties, they don't use a pocket square. You know what I'm saying? So I'm trying to give myself something that people will be able to appreciate in me.

Branding as a self-presentational strategy promises a means for controlling one's self-presentation. Davis (2014) refers to this as the process of self-triangulation, the "strategic connection of identity performances across multiple physical and digitally mediated interaction environments" (p. 512). This process presumes a cohesion between selves performed across contexts, creating a "meta-narrative and meta-image of self" (Hearn 2008b). As Jessica put it:

…even your Facebook page is kind of this idea of branding, right? Because you're not supposed to post everything on your Facebook page, you're only really carefully selecting photos that you put up, setting your 'about me' section, so it's kind of this idea of branding your idea of an identity, not necessarily what your identity actually is, so I think that relates back to the fashion blogging as well.
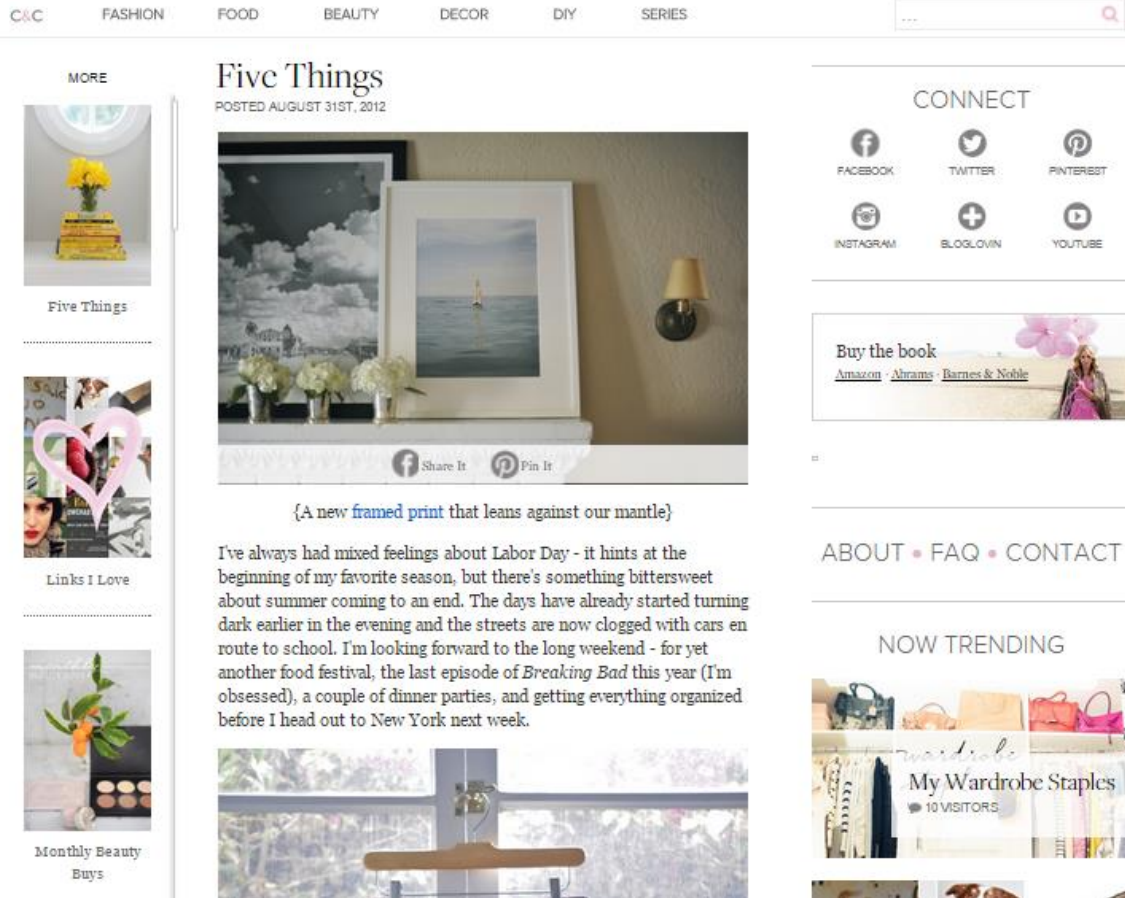
Image 1. Screen capture from *Cupcakes and Cashmere* (2012)

Jessica's note also echoes Van Dijck's findings (2013) on the ways the digital interface encourage self-promotion, blurring the boundaries between people and products. Individuals brand themselves as a means of self-promotion. The discourse of branding frames branding as a way of controlling one's self-image and profiting from it, promising a means of controlling some of the uncertainty and instability they face under hypermodernity (Armitage 2001; Bauman 2000; Brighenti 2007; Charles 2009; Gottschalk 1999; 2009; Lipovetsky 2005; Redhead 2011; Thompson 2005; Virilio 2000).

Some bloggers wholeheartedly embraced self-branding as a means of achieving their

goals. Ryan is typical in this regard when he expresses his desire to have "a giant brand":

> I refer to myself as a brand because I went out of my way to create a voice, create a persona, and also have aspiration to do video work…. I'm on YouTube, too, and for me, maybe I want to be a celebrity to some degree and that's a big part of it and I think I will be doing more in the vein of like, video, of putting myself out there and doing work where I'm comedic or I write things and try to get notice for having that voice and having a unique perspective…. I'm not just some kid with, "Look at my outfit today!" I want a giant brand…. And you know, for me down the line, I would love blogging to take off and to incorporate video content, to be producing sketches, I would love to be doing so much more. For me, if I could get my foot in the door in one way, I guarantee you Jennifer, I will be running with it.

For Ryan, a blog is a way to get his "foot in the door." It is just one platform

where he can develop a persona, which—he hopes--might resonate with a larger

audience, ushering in bigger and better opportunities. However, in presenting themselves

to an invisible, ephemeral, and anonymous audience, bloggers lose control over how their

readers will perceive and respond to them (Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Lair et al. 2005;

Wee and Brooks 2010). Furthermore, as their material and moral success is increasingly

achieved through successfully branding themselves, other options for self-presentation

begin to lose credence (Lair et al. 2005; Marwick 2014). Thus, as bloggers create

symbolic value through self-branding, they limit how they can present themselves, and

become hostages to audience and corporate partners' expectations.

Bloggers are simultaneously encouraged to think of themselves as products to be

marketed, and as authors who blog "for themselves," as an outward expression of an

inner passion for aestheticization. Blogging conferences promote this ideal. Here,

bloggers glean the message that they should blog out of an innate "passion" for fashion

and style. As Elizabeth Morrow wrote at the INDIE E-conference:

> The important thing is to give everything a cohesive feel. And even more important is to post about what you *really feel passionately about*… If you don't

care about your content, your readers will notice and your blog will feel stale and contrived. Plus, you'll enjoy it considerably less if you post things that you have no interest in! [emphasis original]

Although these two injunctions seem contradictory, the discourse of branding resolves this tension by constructing the self-brand as reflecting a core, "true" self (Banet-Weiser 2012; Chen 2013; Marwick 2014). Morrow voices this sentiment when she describes branding her own blog:

> When I thought about my own branding, I thought about things I love. I love faux wood grain, vintage wallpaper, tacky 70's things, and avocado green. I'm pretty sure it's not hard to tell that all these things that I love really influenced my branding…. It would be silly for me to brand my blog like Le Blog De Betty has her blog branded because we are totally different people with different styles. I'd be misrepresenting myself and my blog if I went about trying to emulate her branding. Plus, it'd be really confusing for my readers if my branding didn't match the content of my blog. The more they read my blog and saw my photos, the more they'd be perplexed by the incongruity.

Morrow describes self-branding as a process of self-reflection and discovery: she looked within herself in order to develop a blog aesthetic that would reflect her self and her taste. At the same time, she presents herself in a cohesive way which is intelligible to her audience. In framing her blog this way, Morrow proposes an affinity between self-discovery and commodification.

Under hypermodernity, we face paradoxical demands toward consumption and self-control (Dean 2008; Lipovetsky 2004). The self-brand exemplifies this paradoxical self—through branding, the individual takes control over his or her image in order to manage economic uncertainty. This self-control is framed as pleasurable, a way of getting in touch with one's authentic self. In reality, however, for bloggers who aspire to make a living from their blog, branding is an ongoing, and sometimes intrusive process. Charlene describes the pressure bloggers sometime face to stay true to their brands even outside of their blogs:

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> … I remember I was really drunk, eating a burrito, and someone came up to me and was like, "Hey, blah, blah, blah!" And it feels kind of invasive and weird, but it's like, that's what you're putting yourself out there doing, so imagine if that was like, ten scale or like twenty scale and like, you're like, "Oh, I've just been wearing all these corporate brands and kind of rolling down this path to pay rent, and now this is the persona I have to be, like kinda cutesy or whatever and I'm not, I really just like drinking beer."

As Charlene notes, the self is not cohesive, but situationally dependent. Rather than experiencing an affinity between marketability and authenticity, bloggers must often resolve the tension between presenting a cohesive self-brand and producing a brand which the audience perceives as authentic. When bloggers present themselves to their audience, they invite a particular relationship and establish a set of expectations. As one participant, Kat, said of the appeal of blogs, "[Y]ou get to know them and it's not just a relationship with their persona, it's a relationship with the blog itself." When asked what makes a good blogger, many participants answered that a good blogger is authentic. Yet several back pedaled and noted that they had no way to know if that blogger was genuine—they could only base their perception on the information the blogger provided them. Charlene, for example, was very keen to distinguish between the real and the "phony." However, as she described an example of what she saw as an authentic blog, she began to question her assumptions:

> I think that all of my favorite blogs, like Miss Moss—she's so straight up and like, everything's so curated to her person—what I assume is her person. But like, I mean—I don't know. Maybe that's who she is on the Internet and not on real life. I don't know.

Charlene begins by asserting how genuine she finds the blog *Miss Moss*, which is operated by the Capetown blogger Diana Moss, and feels that Diana Moss's avowals match her subjective feelings and taste. However, she then acknowledges that she does not actually know who Diana Moss is as a person, and cannot really assess how genuine

Moss's blog actually is. Charlene is not evaluating Moss's genuineness, but how well her blog aligns with Charlene's expectations of her. To be on-brand, then, is to present oneself in a way which is consistent with one's audience's expectations. In this case, authenticity is defined less by being true to oneself, but being true to one's self-brand. Bloggers experience a tension in presenting a self which felt true to themselves while also satisfying their audience.

In contrast to the presupposition that one's brand will align with one's subjective feelings of self, some bloggers have to contend with readers expecting things of them that they did not anticipate. For example, although Faith, a plus-size blogger, never experienced any significant self-esteem issues, as she began blogging, she found many of her readers had, and they reached out to her in unexpected ways:

> When I started the blog, for me, it was more about just the fashion…. I've never been a person that really didn't have self-esteem, so that was a little baffling to me that there were so many people who had self-esteem problems. So I fought that portion for a long time, "I just want this blog to be about fashion, I just want it to be about fashion, I don't want it to be about, you know, self-esteem and this kind of thing because it's just a fashion blog." But I had to cave in and understand that was just kind of a role and mentally I kind of had to accept it as one of my purposes. I mean, it feels… I don't want to say it weirds me out, but I'm not an emotionally expressive person and some people really poured their hearts out to me and you're like, not that I don't feel them, but I didn't grow up in that kind of family, so when people do that, it kind of pulls you back a little bit...

Faith's audience interpreted her brand in a different way than she intended. She lost control over her brand, and ultimately surrendered to pressures to blog in a different way. Other bloggers, like Fiona, had similar experiences with their readers. Throughout her interview, Fiona expressed ambivalence about her audience. Although she appreciated their support, and described them as well-intentioned, she felt they were unintelligent and uncool, and that they reflected poorly on her. As she put it:

Fiona: I don't want to be liked by shitty people because that means I'm shitty.

Author: How so?

Fiona: I don't know. If someone liked Hitler and also liked me, something's wrong there.

Despite Fiona's ambivalence toward her audience, she often found herself pandering to them in ways that did not feel authentic to her:

Fiona: I write things all the time and I'm just like, I'll just put my head down for a minute. But I won't delete it. I'll leave it there and I'll just go like, this is the dumbest thing ever… Like, two days ago I wrote, "Goth is nothing to fear," and I just fucking banged my head into a wall twelve times, but I left it there. Because your readers aren't going to read that and think, "That's idiotic," because they don't know my thought process. Me knowing my own thought process makes it so much more sensitive or something, so obviously I'm being my biggest critic. At any rate, I'm sure if someone else wrote, "Goth is nothing to be fear," I'd be like, "God, what a fucking loon." And I'd like, close that tab and go back to reading Something Awful forums. Just like, get over it. I don't know. But I can't speak for everybody. I think my readers—if someone else said, "Goth is nothing to fear," they'd write in the comments, "You're right! Goth *is* nothing to fear! I'll try that out next time! Check out my blog! Flowersandwaistcoats.blogspot.com."

Author: So, why don't you delete stuff that you don't like?

Fiona: Um, sometimes I do if I feel like it's too, if it's just way too far from what I'm really about but sometimes I just feel like, whatever. I feel like it's what my readers want to hear and what they feel comfortable with and it makes me more at one with them and I think they feel endeared to me because I speak like them, but I don't want to say that I approve of that kind of behavior, because I don't. I don't think it's fine to change who you are to garner acceptance.

Fiona feels strongly that some of the content that she produces is not true to whom she is as a person—she refers to the content as "idiotic," and says that it makes her come off as a "fucking loon." She clearly states that in the abstract, she does not approve of changing oneself for others. However, despite how inauthentic this content feels to her, and despite the physical and emotional reaction she has towards it, she continues to publish material which feels inauthentic because it fits her audience's needs and expectations of her. Fiona's audience do not have access to these backstage thought

processes, however—all they see is the consistency with which her presentation of self aligns with their expectations. The injunction to visibility dismisses the invisible aspects of the person—the internal, mental space—in favor of what appears in public (Haroche 2011). Fiona's internal thought processes ultimately had no bearing on her public persona. Thus, what feels inauthentic to Fiona does not damage the authenticity of her brand.

Trilling (1972) contrasts between sincerity, which is other-directed, and authenticity, which is self-directed. From this perspective, the concept of an authentic self-brand is a contradiction: if self-branding is a means of capitalizing on the self, it is inherently other-directed—a means to a commercial end rather than an end in itself. In the wake of brand culture, however, that dynamic has shifted. As Banet-Weiser (2012) describes, in contemporary western culture, branding is not seen as a cynical marketing ploy or a form of encroaching commodification, but as a form of self-care, self-discovery and self-actualization (Banet-Weiser 2012; Chen 2013; Lair et al. 2005; Marwick 2014; Wee and Brooks 2010). Rather than framing self-branding as a means to an end, the discourse of self-branding presumes an affinity between the striving for an authentic self and the needs of the market. Thus, self-branding is not seen as a commodification of self, but as a means of self-realization (Chen 2013; Marwick 2014; Lair et al. 20005; Wee and Brooks 2010). It is not only an economic necessity, but in some social milieus, a moral imperative (Banet-Weiser 2012; Harris 2004; Marwick 2014; Wee and Brooks 2010). In the following section, I examine how bloggers' produce symbolic value through their relationship to their audience, and how they manage the tension between appealing to their readers as they commodify themselves.

Self-Branding and the Production of Symbolic Value

In research on self-branding among Taiwanese YouTube users, Chen (2013)

framed brands as relationship partners, arguing that consumers choose to consume brands

which "add meanings to their lives" (p. 355). Branding invites a certain emotional

relationship and creates a set of expectations for the audience, inspiring feelings of, for

example, longing or comfort (Arvidsson 2005; Banet-Weiser 2012; Chen 2013). One

participant, Anthony described branding as, "It's kind of like, it's an emotional niche.

You have to draw, from certain people, an emotional response from the audience." As a

representative from Nordstrom told bloggers at IFB, "Readers are savvy—that's why

they come to you guys!" One blogger, Joan, described:

> What brands love about bloggers is … If you send a product to a newspaper to get
> reviewed, you're going to get something that's usually very dry and detached, and
> when you send something to a blogger to be reviewed, it's going to be very
> emotional and very personal and that person is going to put, whether they realize
> it or not, the entire weight of their brand, their readership's trust behind what
> they're saying.

If branding is meant to evoke an "emotional response," bloggers can help

corporate brands to elicit that response. Corporate brands are interested in bloggers

because they have something corporate brands want—a trusting, captive, emotionally-

invested audience, many of whom may not be among the audience for more traditional

fashion media. As a speaker at IFB put it, "Readers are your currency." Bloggers' value

lies in their capacity to develop that personal relationship and trust with their readers.

Because bloggers resonate with readers, they also resonate with the corporate brands that

are attempting to reach those readers. As Faith describes:

> [Y]our readers—they will support you. When you have something coming out—
> my readers are awesome. They'll support it. So you have that kind of support
> already built in before you even do a project.

Joan expressed similar sentiments:

> I feel because bloggers have a relationship with their readers because if you have
> a relationship with your readers and get to know them and know their wants, you
> know how to give them a certain message, deliver a certain product and be
> successful and companies are willing to work with you. They know—when you
> sell yourself, people will be able to relate to you and companies will want to work
> with you for that.

Speakers at the IFB conferences advise bloggers on the importance of producing
original, quality content in order to appeal to fashion brands, but blog content only has
monetary value for fashion brands insofar as it strengthens the relationship between the
bloggers and their audience. It is not bloggers' taste or expertise that makes them
valuable, but their ability to foster intimacy. On one level, readers buy into a blogger's
image, an aesthetic, and a lifestyle. On another, they buy into a relationship with the
blogger. As Sigmund described:

> I wanted to be their friends and I wanted to know who they were, I wanted to
> know what they ate for breakfast, I wanted to know what are they wearing, what
> are they buying, what's cool now… I felt that these were my cool fashion friends
> who dressed so well and I—every day I would open up their blogs and see
> something new from them and I felt so close to them.

Jessica echoed these sentiments:

> I think it's the allure [of blogs] that it's real people, it's real people taking pictures,
> writing about a blog that for some bloggers lets you into their life... and I think
> that's something that's very kind of fun for a reader, right? It's not like looking
> through the pages of *Elle* or *Glamour* or *Vogue*—like, it really is someone's life
> and where they're living and a glance into that... It's kind of like reading an online
> diary... I think that might be the allure of these for the audience, as opposed to
> reading just a fashion magazine which is highly curated and picked and kind of
> thought about for months before that magazine comes out.

As Haroche (2011) describes, to be a subject, one needs to "exist in the others'
eyes" (p. 78). When our selves are only validated, moment-to-moment, by being seen, we

need to perform for the gaze (Birman 2011). Media technologies allow us to draw and hold this gaze by granting the audience intimate access to our inner lives. Haroche (2011) explains, "…it's not sufficient to display one's material goods but… to show one's internal space." (p. 93). By sharing this "internal space" with their audience, bloggers can facilitate feelings of warmth, which translates into continued validation for the self.

For the Silicon Valley professionals studied by Marwick (2014), the self-brand was a way of marketing oneself and one's skills. For personal style bloggers, however, the self-brand is a way of marketing one's tastes and one's lifestyle. Personal style bloggers fashion a self-brand out of consumer items and experiences, which they then convey to an audience of unknown others. In so doing, they mediate the relationship between their readers and the consumer goods and experiences they comment on. As Arvidsson (2005) notes, branding has little to do with the actual goods being sold, and much more to do with the systems of meanings which consumers construct around them. Because they produce symbolic value through their own self-brands, one can conceptualize personal style bloggers as cultural intermediaries.

Bourdieu initially conceptualized "new cultural intermediaries" as members of the petite bourgeoisie, charged with managing the growing middle class's access to legitimate culture (Bourdieu 1984). He traced the rise of cultural intermediaries to the shift to a service economy that created an imperative for individuation, consumption, and pleasure-seeking. Amidst this more fragmented cultural terrain, cultural intermediaries aid in orienting individuals in their new role as consumers (Cronin 2004). The more recent literature has shifted from this original conceptualization to discuss how cultural

intermediaries mediate norms, values, and behaviors to serve commercial interests (Moor 2012).

As Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) suggest, what distinguishes the work of cultural intermediaries from other acts of symbolic production is that their voices have greater reach and legitimacy than others, based in part on their claims to expertise. In the cases of personal concierges (Sherman 2011) or models (Wissinger 2009), this expertise may not stem from institutional legitimacy, but rather from claims to some kind of "natural" taste, style, and personality, which is authentically their own. Wissinger (2009), for example, finds that models not only sell products and themselves, but also the idea of the "fashionable life," a lifestyle they are expected—and shown to—maintain 24 hours a day. Similarly, when brands' PR people collaborate with or host parties for bloggers, they are trying to tap into the lifestyle and image that bloggers project. On their part, bloggers themselves are trying to communicate that they are indeed living that same fashionable lifestyle. Like models, their private lives become inseparable from their public work.

Leandra Medine, author of the blog *Man Repeller*, noted at the February 2013 IFB conference that the top bloggers' lives become about their brand. However, this is not only true of top bloggers, but those who aspire to reaching the status of top bloggers and fashion insiders. For bloggers like Nick, who aspires to work in the fashion industry, the process of branding is constant:

> In order for me to really be successful anywhere, especially if I want to grow with my blog, I have to remind myself that, "Look, you're a brand. You need to sell yourself everywhere that you go, online and in person." So sometimes I have to remind myself because I tend to forget a lot of times because I have an active life—I work two jobs, and I'm involved with everything else, I have to remind myself, "Okay, remember, you are a blogger, and you have to brand your blog." So it's a constant battle for me, but I'm learning. I think it takes time, it's not an

overnight thing. It takes time, it's going to take time for me to really get into branding even more.

When the self becomes an asset on which to capitalize in order to remain competitive within an unstable and hyper-predatory employment market, monetization does not necessarily threaten one's authenticity. As Scott Allen, a representative from RakutenLinkshare, said at the February 2013 IFB conference, "You really can make a lot of money, and maintain your integrity and your voice, and that's really important." RakutenLinkshare is an affiliate marketing company that pay bloggers a commission whenever readers buy items after following links appearing on the blogs. Representing a company which capitalizes on bloggers' labor, it is in Allen's best interest to convince them that monetization and authenticity can go hand-in-hand. As corporate brands began seeing blogs as a source of value, they were quick to dismiss the belief that monetization and authenticity are antithetical. However, the marriage between these two requires a delicate balance enabling one to monetize one's blog only in ways that both reinforce one's brand and maintains a relationship with readers. As Allen explains:

> If you do a brand partnership that's outside the scope of what your readers' style is and it's obvious, I mean, of course that's not going to work well with your readership. If you're partnering with a brand that reinforces your voice, it should be a win-win. They should be endorsing you just as much as they're endorsing you.

While the tension between commodification and authenticity remains, readers seem more interested in debating how well bloggers integrate corporate interests with their own brand, than whether or not a blogger is beholden to corporate interests at all. As Vahni Georgulakos of the blog *Grit and Glamor* put it, "We are our brand… [monetizing is] not worth cheapening our brand." Bloggers' value rests on their brand, and a

collaboration that does not resonate with that brand may be more damaging than beneficial. For Joan:

> I mean, you know, if Coach called me up and wanted to do a collaboration, I'd certainly think about it, but I'm more likely to go—like, I've worked with [less prestigious brand] handbags, which is a slightly lower price point and a less chichi brand.

While Coach may have more prestige, greater name recognition, and may give Joan more money and exposure, it does not align with her personal brand and reader expectations.

In addition to the risk of partnering with corporate brands that do not fit a blogger's own self-brand, excessive advertising may also hurt a blogger's credibility. As Justin Livingston of the blog *Scout Sixteen* put it, too much advertising and a blogger crosses a line from an "organic ambassador" to a "salesperson." The organic ambassador provides value to her readers by exposing them to new brands, products, and ideas. In contrast, the salesperson exploits her readers by capitalizing on their trust for her own financial gain. Partnerships with brands should come across naturally and be consistent with the tone of the blog. Bloggers should not appear to be endorsing products because they want to earn money, but because they use those products, they resonate well with the blog content, and enhance their ability to express their "authentic voice." As Joan described:

> Um, readers get riled up if everything that you're wearing was given to you for free and I think that—I find that to be interesting personally because—the argument seems to be that if you're given everything for free, then it's not really your style that's being expressed and what I take issue with there is when someone comes to you and says, "I want to give you some free shoes," it's very unlikely they're going to say, "I'm gonna pick them out and just send them to you and you have to deal with it." I mean, usually you say, "That's fantastic! I'll take these." So you're still exercising your taste and your choice, you just didn't put your money into it.

However, the line between staying authentic and selling out is not always clear-cut, and many bloggers described the difficulty in negotiating this tension. For example, Marie, 25, took a sponsorship from a company which she did not feel aligned with her own sense of style. As she described:

> I don't think a blogger's style is going to change because they receive a free dress here and there. But, I definitely had to post some [sponsored content] last summer featuring clothing items that I did not like. I felt so guilty when I posted it.

> Feeling validated by corporate brand overtures and short on cash, many bloggers

quickly betray their own personal convictions or tastes. As Charlene described:

> I'd like to say I would look into the ethics of the company before I thought about it because I don't do it for a living, but like, honestly, I'm like, "I really like this dress! Okay!" Which is really gross to admit, yeah, it's really gross to admit it but I definitely have done that… I can see how easy it would be to slip down a road where a company that you think is all right and have all right stuff is like, "Hey, we'll pay you like, $1000 to wear this pair of shoes," and you're like, "I'm kind of broke and trying to piece it together and like, all by myself and trying to make this happen. Yeah, I'm gonna do it." You know?

> Blogger Maegan Tintari of the blog *Love Maegan* is a good example of a person

who crossed the line between the "organic ambassador" and "salesperson." Over the course of operating her blog, Tintari developed a trusting relationship with her audience by speaking candidly about personal issues, including her struggle with infertility. However, as she began featuring more sponsored content from corporate brands (such as cranberry juice) that did not fit with her blog's tone, some of her readers began to question her authenticity. She wrote a blog post in response to these detractors:

> We bloggers work hard and offer free content day after day after day AFTER DAY as entertainment and enjoyment for YOU. FOR FREE. So AM I going to throw a cupcake party with my family after finishing a big project and drink cranberry juice because they paid me $1000 to do so? HELL YES I AM because *I'm a product* now too, just like the juice is, and if a company thinks there's a good ROI for them if they pay me to talk about their product on my blog, them [sic] I'M GOING TO DO IT, just as I would as an actor. And you know what, you would too. (Tintari 2013)

Tintari misconstrued her readers' anger. Her readers did not expect her to be non-commodified. However, they did expect that the corporate brands she promoted resonate with her own personal brand. Tintari also misconstrued the source of her brand's value. Her self-brand is only valuable to corporate brands insofar as she remains valuable to her audience. Since her brand's value lie in giving off the impression of authenticity, being perceived as inauthentic translates into a rapid drop in the value of her own self-brand. Tintari's experience reflects the challenges in meeting audience expectations when engaging in a monological interaction. Bloggers present themselves to a public audience, which decontextualizes their self performances, and complicates the process of impression management. This process is further complicated because bloggers often have limited information about their audience. In the following section, I explore bloggers' experiences of context collapse, and how they attempt to manage the desituatedness of the branded self by directing their presentation of self toward an imagined audience.
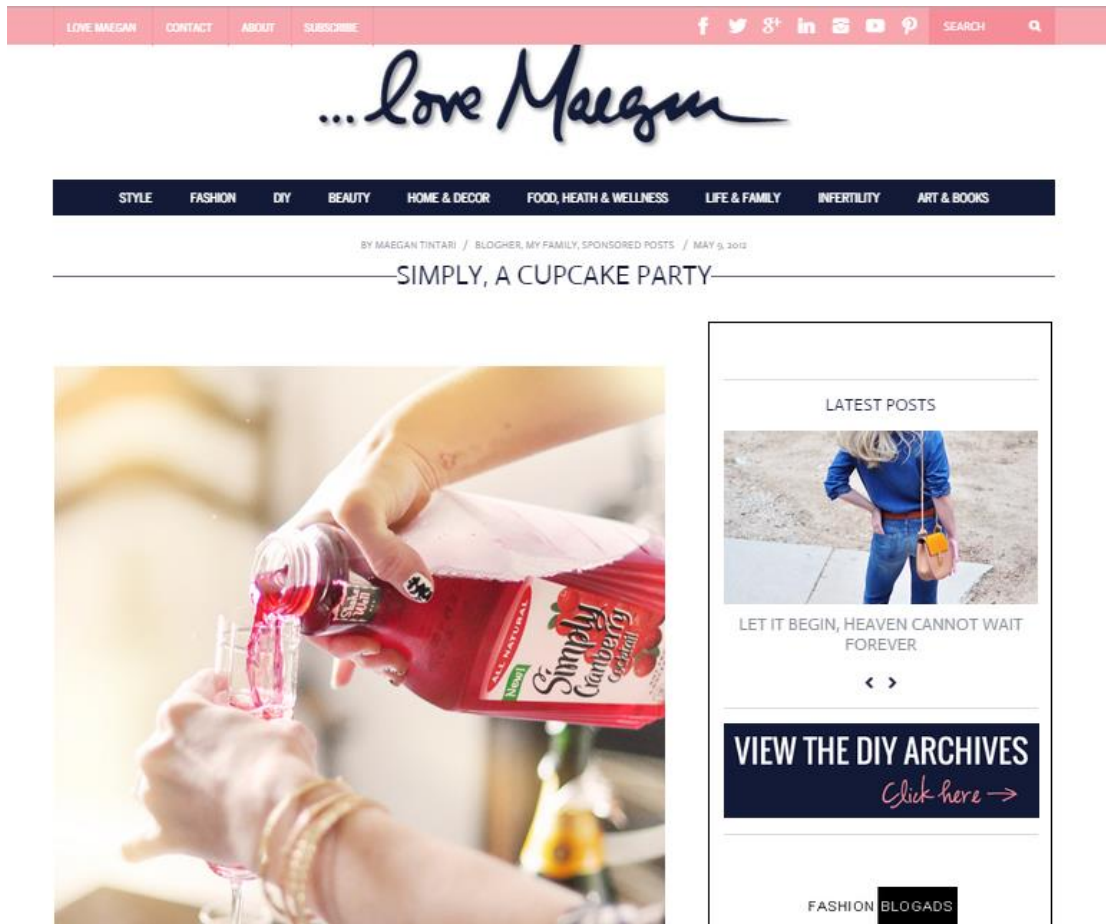
Image 2. Screen capture from *...love Maegan* (2012)

Context Collision and the Imagined Audience

Whereas branding discourse emphasizes a cohesive self across all platforms, Goffman (1959) notes that we perform different selves in different situational contexts, and that this requires that we disclose information to our audience which supports our performance, and that we keep information which may discredit our performance hidden backstage. For Goffman, when one appears in public, one makes oneself vulnerable to evaluation, and possibly to discreditation. When we can keep our audiences discrete, we have more control over how they perceive us and thus limit the risks of discreditation.

However, we significantly lose that ability when we broadcast our self to an audience of unknown, anonymous and invisible others. Although bloggers attempt to control audience access to these different selves, they increase their risk of being discredited when the self they present on their blog may contradict the self they present in different contexts, or when the self they present on their blog at one point may contradict a self they present at another point.

Not all the bloggers I spoke with aspired to make money from their blogs or use them as a springboard to a career in a creative industry. They saw their blog as a hobby, a way of expressing a side of themselves which they may not have as opportunities to express otherwise. These hobby bloggers distinguished between their identities as bloggers and their identities in other walks of life, and several made a concerted effort to hide their blogs from friends, colleagues, and family members. In these cases, bloggers felt that their blogging could discredit a different part of their identity. Many, like Kat, were concerned that their blogs would make them seem frivolous and narcissistic. Kat decided to start a personal style blogging after noticing the community surrounding vintage style blogs. She wanted to be a part of that community, but felt it reflected poorly on her in some ways. Because she was so ambivalent, she purposely avoided telling people about her blog:

> I don't tell people about it. And if people that I do know are like, "Oh, I saw your blog," I become really embarrassed and… then I try to change the subject. I don't know what it is, but I just prefer to keep blogging as its own separate thing… I think for me it's mostly like the vanity thing. It seems really vain and superficial and I don't want people to associate me with those adjectives. Um, but, when they do find out, they don't seem, like, horrified. People are like, "Oh, I saw your blog." They're not like, "Oh my God, you're a vain monster." You know? (laughs) But I don't know. I still feel that way.

Despite the publicness of their blogs, some bloggers clearly thought of their audience as discrete from their audience in other aspects of their life. At the same time, they recognized the paradox in presenting a public self to an audience of unknown others, while trying to keep that self private. As Charlene put it:

> I don't want people to know about it. I kind of started dating this guy and it was like this real gnarly thing in my chest, like, I haven't told him about this dark secret, you know? And if he even Googled my name it would be like, all over, you know?

Although she acknowledged the publicness of her blog, Charlene still expected—or, rather, hoped—that she be able to maintain boundaries between the self she presents on her blog and the self she presents in other arenas of her life. However, because their blogs are public, bloggers are not always able to maintain these boundaries. Two participants described their reactions to having their blogs featured in a local magazine. Jessica feared her blog would make her look less serious to her professors:

> I was in this magazine… and then my advisor saw me in it and it was this moment of, "Oh God! I don't know what to do!" And I had to explain about like, the fashion blog that I write and he thought it was really funny, but I don't know. I'm writing a paper with him, he clearly wrote me a good letter of recommendation for graduate school, but like (laughs). Still, one of those moments of, "Oh, now you think that I'm less smart. Please give me an A on my thesis still." (laughs) "It's a really good thesis!"

Jessica's fears were ultimately unfounded. Although her advisor was not in her imagined audience, and although she feared her blog may make her seem less serious in his eyes, her blog did not discredit her claims of being a good student. However, the anxiety she felt and the potential for discreditation was real. Marie described a similar experience when a professor found out about her blog:

> Marie: …I always feel uncomfortable with it when I'm confronted about it in my everyday life. I was chatting on the phone back in November with one of my college professors and somehow, I don't know how, he knew about my blog. He

asked me if I was working the fashion industry and if I was modeling. I didn't know what to say. I was speechless and quite embarrassed.

Author: So you feel weird when people bring it up to you in the "real world"?

Marie: Yes. For me, it's a very personal, private activity. There's just that unavoidable paradox where it happens to be posted on the internet for all the world to see... That's another reason I've been posting more on the French historical figures. I wanted to produce content that I would be proud of anyone seeing. I wanted to produce content that felt like more than just a narcissistic activity.

Both Marie and Jessica were concerned that their interest in fashion and style would make them seem unserious and narcissistic to their professional contacts. While they intended to keep these different audiences separate, they could not always do so. In those cases when they found the boundaries between their audiences converging, they experienced a context collision. To manage potentially negative consequences, they engaged in some preliminary impression management. Marie would have liked to have withheld information from her readers, yet they demanded more of her. Marie felt pressure to put more of herself on her blog, but doing so could discredit her self. To resolve this tension, she introduced a series of blog posts combining her professional interest in history with her personal interest in fashion. Jessica tried to keep her blog "professional" by controlling the kinds of information she displayed:

> There's nothing inappropriate on it, but still I just really wanted it to be kind of more, as professional as possible… you see pictures on our blog of us going out going to the Vintage Expo or something like that, but I will never post pictures of me with a drink in my hand and that was because I worked at an all-girls Catholic high school for the past year, so like, I didn't want any, I don't know. Which is really funny because I go out a lot, but I didn't want alcohol associated with me on my blog when I was applying to graduate schools and also on the job market, which is kind of a weird thing. I don't know, you never know what would happen.

In order to get a sense of who bloggers are and whether the image they present on their blog reflects their senses of self, readers expect bloggers to grant them some

backstage access into their lives. As one IFB panelist told attendees on a social media

panel, "one of the currencies you have is sharing more information." Through that

backstage access, the audience can construct a gestalt of who a blogger is, and use that

image in evaluating his or her self-presentation. However, the more information a blogger

provides, the more risks the blogger runs of being discredited. Bloggers must provide

some backstage access to their audience, or at least the illusion of backstage access, so as

to develop an intimate relationship with them, but they must manage the information

which could potentially discredit the authenticity of their brands.

Different bloggers set up different sets of expectations for how much backstage

access they will give. One blogger I interviewed speaks candidly about her body, but not

about her family. Another was reluctant to share elements of her personal life, but shared

some of her academic interest in fashion with her readers. However, there are certain

normative limits to how candidly bloggers may present themselves on their blog or social

media. When I asked blogger Greta what kind of image she was trying to project on her

blog, she said:

> I guess personal but professional.... I know myself, whenever I follow a blog, I
> like to read a little bit about the person. I might not want to read a whole blog and
> read every intimate detail of their life because I feel that's none of my business,
> but it's nice to know a little bit about what they're doing. If they go on a trip, it's
> fun to see a picture. So I guess that's what I try to um, project is like, personable,
> but , you know, I love answering questions, I really want to be friendly, but I
> don't want to overshare with people to the degree that they're like, "Whoa, we did
> not need to know that."

For Greta, some backstage access is important, but too much is off-putting. As

Marwick (2014) described, although the brand is supposed to be "authentic" and to

reflect a person's "passions," it required a large degree of editing and management so as

to be "safe for work." While Marwick was writing about Silicon Valley professionals,

who are promoting their careers, her remarks apply to personal style bloggers as well. At the same IFB panel where bloggers were told to share information as a form of currency, a conference attendee who described getting "wretched" on Twitter was advised to censor herself. Advices offered on the IFB blog reflect this attitude. As one IFB post on bloggers' use of Twitter put it:

> As a rule of thumb, think of it like this: if you were meeting someone for the first time over lunch, would you feel comfortable sharing this 140 soundbite with them? If your gut tells you no, then reconsider the wording of this particular tweet before you send it out. (DiNardo 2013)

Bloggers may receive feedback and comments from some readers, they may have access to statistical data regarding the size of their readership, and they may be able to see the profiles of some readers via services like Bloglovin or the now-defunct Google Friend Connect. However, while they may have a general sense of who is reading their blog on a regular basis, they cannot account for readers who do not follow them, comment on their blog, or contact them in some other way. Nor can they be sure how each reader interprets or receives the information they communicate. In order to better pitch their presentation of self, bloggers construct an imagined audience to which they direct their performance (Litt 2012).

The idea of an imagined audience is not novel. When Cooley (1902) asserts that society is "in the mind," he was referring to the ways we construct our audience and interpret their reactions in our imaginations. However, the capacity of social media to decontextualize the performance of self complicates the relationship between imagined audience and actual audience, decreasing actors' control over the presentation and reception of self. Furthermore, as Kat described, without substantive contact with readers, imagining an audience is not always easy to do:

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I just assume that nobody reads my blog. I know a couple hundred people do, because I have the followers, but it's really… I just assume that nobody in real life. Because—I don't know. When I say "real life," it's not like people on the Internet aren't real people, but it's hard to imagine them as such. Like, you don't physically see them.

Bloggers' main source of information regarding their reception is comments—yet most bloggers were skeptical about how genuine those comments were, bemoaning the number of self-promotional "spam" comments their readers left. The relationship between bloggers and their readers is very uneven. Bloggers have very little information about their readers, but readers know a lot about bloggers. They often deem the sources of information about how they are being received—like comments—as untrustworthy. Thus, bloggers rely on an imagined image of their audience which is typically reflective of themselves.

However, because the potential audience is so much broader than the imagined audience, bloggers cannot be sure that their audience will validate their performance of self. Marwick (2014) described how people at the margins of the San Francisco tech scene engaged in self-promotional practices on social media in order to increase their visibility. However, due to their marginal place in the scene, these attempts were often treated with derision. Similarly, style bloggers can perform "blog-worthiness," or the quality of being worthy of visibility, but that worth needs to be validated by an audience. Several bloggers acknowledged that by presenting themselves to an audience, they made themselves vulnerable. Their claims to blog-worthiness were often insufficiently validated, and they sometimes received negative comments and emails. Vince discussed how people would tell him he was trying too hard, or that he looked like a "cartoon character":

…I got some comments that they didn't like my style or that I looked like a cartoon character, which to me, I feel like that would be a compliment, but they didn't mean it in a complimentary way. But they thought that I dressed like a cartoon character, and that I tried too hard. It was weird to get someone to say something negative because I don't have enough followers to compliment me to have followers to, you know, feel a disregard toward me.

Vince recognized that he cannot control how his audience perceive him but he emphasized more than once during the interview that his relative lack of followers should have protected him from such blatant threats to face. The larger his audience would become, the more likely the risks that his blog would be seen by people outside the imagined audience. However, even with his modest audience, he ultimately lost control over the way others perceived his presentation of self, and had his claims of blog-worthiness invalidated. Vince was not alone in receiving negative attention. Although most of the bloggers I spoke with described positive interactions with readers, some faced hostility. Angry readers sometimes contacted bloggers directly through email or comments, and at other times, targeted them via the anti-fan site Get Off My Internets (GOMI).

Most studies of anti-fandoms focus on large scale media properties like *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades of Gray* (Gray 2003; 2005). Less is said about the anti-fandoms devoted to microcelebrities like bloggers. While self-styled microcelebrities lack the public exposure of more traditional media celebrities, they are not exempt from the kind of scrutiny and moral outrage which characterize other anti-fandoms. According to Marwick (2014), one notable exception is the anti-fan following of writer Julia Allison, which is centered on the blog Reblogging Donk. Allison's detractors feel she is too stupid, vapid, and vain to deserve the kind of visibility she has achieved. In contrast to a site like Reblogging Donk, whose authors focus their hostility toward a particular subject, the

anti-fan site GOMI focuses on a specific genre. GOMI is not only about personal style

and fashion bloggers, but about bloggers in a variety of lifestyle genres, including DIY

blogs, food blogs, and parenting blogs. GOMI includes a blog, which features tabloid-

style posts about incendiary things bloggers have done, a wiki explaining some of the

site's inside jokes, as well as a forum on which users can post about blogs that they want

to "get off my Internets". As of January 4, 2015, the Fashion Bloggers forum on GOMI

had 608 topics and 112,092 posts, although boards and posts are occasionally deleted.

Each thread is devoted to a different blogger or topic, and the top five most popular ones

contain over 400 pages each. Bloggers' experiences with negative comments, and GOMI

in particular, signal the potential threat of public discreditation of displays of self. As

described on the About GOMI (About GOMI n.d.) page:

> Get Off My Internets was started in 2009, and originally started out snarking about various online personalities. It evolved quickly into a space for people to mainly talk about bloggers. With the rise of blogging-as-a-job bloggers have become a new kind of 'reality star' for the modern world. GOMI provides a space for blog readers to share opinions about these web celebrities in a (mostly) moderation free zone away from the delete and ban buttons of a blogger's comment area.

As GOMI's founders describe it, bloggers are public figure, and those who

comment on GOMI argue that in presenting themselves on a public forum, bloggers are

opening themselves to criticism.

Presenting oneself to an online public audience entails claiming that one has

something worthwhile to present. Garnering traffic from a site like Get Off My Internets

discredits one's claims to self-worth and self-validation. The name of the site itself

implies that some people are "unbloggable," not living appropriately blog-worthy lives

and thus, undeserving of affirmation, visibility or any spot on the Internet. Ironically, the

traffic bloggers receive from GOMI can be indistinguishable from traffic from any other

source. As a frequent GOMI target, Joan expressed her disgust for that site and other sources of negative attention. Yet, as she described, "Get Off My Internets is my number four referral. I get a shit ton of money off of them, so they can keep it up and that's just fine with me." Paradoxically, although the title "Get Off My Internets" suggests the bloggers they discuss are unworthy of visibility, GOMI makes Joan and the other bloggers they lampoon highly visible. Although she was able to translate that visibility into material gain, the attention she received through GOMI was not validating. She had visibility and attention, but without recognition.

Not only negative attention is face threatening, but a lack of attention altogether. Hoping to   parlay his blog into professional creative opportunities, Ryan blogged regularly since 2011, posting several times a week, typically original content featuring professional-quality photographs. Despite this, he described difficulty garnering a large, engaged readership. As he put it:

> I mean I'm, I guess I should admit to some bitterness, but I feel like when I put out my independent voice like, and you don't get comments and stuff, you're just like, dammit, I'm in a vacuum. It can be really hard to feel like you're getting to have a say when there's no dialogue. Um, because you're like, okay, everyone gets their own voice, but if you're talking to a wall, what's the point?

Ryan was demoralized by, the lack of feedback, and specifically, the lack of meaningful feedback. In expressing self, one asserts that one is worth paying attention to. In so doing, one makes oneself vulnerable, because the audience ultimately evaluates those claims of worth. Bloggers thus find it demotivating to receive only a few comments, followers, and page views. If blogs are an expression of self, a lack of validation for the blog is a lack of validation for the self. In contrast with face-to-face interactions, appearing in public is not enough to ensure visibility online. As Birman (2011) argues, in the digital landscape, "I am seen, therefore I am"—our sense of self is predicated on remaining in eye of the

other. While visibility is not guaranteed in face-to-face interactions, we can at least tell whether or not we have the attention of the other. When we engage in non-reciprocal interactions on social media, we are often unsure how, or if, others see us. Without feedback, the individual exists "in a vacuum," lacking the basic social validation necessary for the maintenance of the self (Mead 1934).

Summary

The discourse of self-branding presumes an affinity between needs of the self and needs of the market. In the face of instability, self-branding promises to give individuals more control over themselves and their employment prospects. To brand oneself, one presents a cohesive self to an audience of unknown others for the purpose of material gain. Bloggers present themselves in a consistent way and create a set of expectations to which the audience then holds them accountable. However, in reality, self is situational, not consistent, and bloggers are not always "on brand." However, to appear authentic, bloggers' actions must continue to align with audience expectations, regardless of whether bloggers feel those expectations are true to themselves. The branded self exemplifies the paradox of the self under hypermodernity. Self-branding is framed as a means of managing the anxieties of neoliberalism by capitalizing on an authentic self. However, in making self-worth contingent on drawing and maintaining the spotlight, self-branding actually makes the self more fragile and vulnerable to invalidation.

At the February 2013 IFB conference in New York, a panelist on a social media panel asked the audience to consider, "What do you have that you can leverage that's uniquely yours?" The answer, reiterated throughout the conference, was that what

bloggers have to offer is the ability to foster a relationship with an audience. Ultimately, bloggers' relationship to their audience is their currency. They foster this relationship by constructing a coherent brand which stays consistent across social media platform. As cultural spaces increasingly operate on capitalist logic and practices, self-branding becomes an increasingly attractive strategy for presenting the self. Those who do not do so risk alienating their audience, missing out on social validation as well as economic opportunities.

However, the process of self-branding is complicated by the parameters of blogging, through which bloggers present themselves in a decontextualized way to an unseen public audience. In so doing, bloggers risk context collisions, whereby audiences converge in unintended ways. Bloggers can attempt to manage the risk of discreditation by preemptively self-censoring themselves. Because they have limited information about who comprises their audience, they direct their self-presentation toward an imagined audience, which may or may not resemble their actual audience. However, blogging does not guarantee an audience at all. In presenting themselves to the imagined audience, bloggers open themselves up to discreditation and invalidation, either through criticism or a lack of attention.

Audiences do not evaluate an individual's self-presentations in terms of how well it aligns with the actor's subjective feelings, but in terms of how well it meets their expectations. This is not qualitatively different from the process of self-presentation in other settings. However, when these self-presentations are de-contextualized, the self-presentation is more at risk of discreditation. By presenting themselves to an audience of unknown others, individuals lose control over self-presentation and become beholden the

audience's expectations. Bloggers have little information as to who comprises their audience, which makes it difficult for them to manage their self-presentation. Furthermore, because the discourse of self-branding presumes a core self which is consistent across interactions, bloggers who attempt to compartmentalize their selves increase the risk of being discredited as "fake" or inauthentic. However, even bloggers who present a cohesive self-brand are vulnerable to discreditation if their claims to visibility are not supported by the audience.

**CHAPTER 5: "BETWEEN A REGULAR PERSON AND A CELEBRITY":
MICROCELEBRITY AND THE BALANCE BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND
BLOG-WORTHINESS**

In her research on camgirls, Senft (2008) developed the concept of

microcelebrity, which she later defined as, "the commitment to deploying and

maintaining one's online identity as though it were a branded good, with the expectation

that others do the same" (Senft 2013). In a promotional brand culture, individuals

perform microcelebrity as a way of managing their brands and performing

noteworthiness. As Senft (2013) describes, microcelebrity and branding—once marginal

self-presentational strategies—have become increasingly mainstream, thanks in part to

the proliferation of social media technologies which provide a platform for what Hogan

(2010) refers to as a public exhibition of self through the display of carefully cultivated

digital artifacts.

Microcelebrities are well-known to a small niche of people, but microcelebrity is

about more than visibility. It is a self-presentational strategy through which one creates a

persona and produces "authentic" content to an audience of unknown others. The

individual who performs microcelebrity thinks of the audience as fans, creating a

hierarchal relationship between him or herself and his or her readers. Marwick (2014)

notes, "Despite this constant call for authenticity, authenticity is not an absolute quality,

but a social judgment always made in distinction to something else" (p. 120).

Authenticity is a social construction, and the evaluation of authenticity lies in the hands

of the audience. At the same time, performing microcelebrity entails that the content

individuals produce not only be authentic, but also worthy of visibility.

Participatory web platforms like blogs did not create the impulse to self-document. Lipovetsky (1994), for instance, describes a proto-style blogger, a European nobleman who illustrated and then published pictures of his daily outfits. With the invention and spread of photography, self-portraiture became more common, occasionally taking the form of private style diaries. Technologies like blogs, photo and video sharing services, and social networking sites reflect, accelerate, and normalize cultural changes in the self and its relationships that began long before Blogger or even Livejournal were on anyone's cultural radar (Wernick 1990). These platforms are both constituted by and constitutive of a culture in which the self is a source of material value.

Upon closer examination of the cultural context which gave rise to the dominance of these self-presentational strategies, we find that individuals do not necessarily perform microcelebrity to enjoy empty adulation, but rather to remain competitive in an entrepreneurial culture that promises that heightened visibility will lead to material success (Banet-Weiser 2012; Chittenden 2010; Derber 2000; Lair et al. 2005; Wee and Brooks 2010). In the previous chapter, I examined how bloggers produce value through self-branding, and how self-branding complicates the process of impression management. In presenting themselves in a consistent way across media platforms, bloggers foster a relationship with their audience, and it is this relationship that provides value to corporate brands and allows bloggers to capitalize on their presentation of self. In this chapter, I examine how bloggers foster these relationships through the performance of authenticity and *blog-worthiness*, or the quality of being worthy of visibility. Performing these qualities requires bloggers to manage the tensions between being a relatable, accessible, individual person and an aspirational, consistent, intelligible brand. The discourses

surrounding microcelebrity posit that the individual alone is responsible for his or her own successes and failures. As long as the individual is worth seeing, an audience will find her. However, bloggers with more "fashionable" bodies are seen as more worthy of visibility. This discourse fits with the individualized, entrepreneurial logics of postfeminism and postracialism that deny the significance of inequalities while continuing to perpetuate them. I first review the literature on microcelebrity, and then outline how bloggers manage the tension between authenticity and blog-worthiness.

Microcelebrity

Daniel Boorstin (1961: 57) famously defined celebrity as "a person who is known for his well-knownness." As Ferris (2007) suggests, this approach to celebrity as irrational, inauthentic, and arising from the machinery of the culture industry rather than rooted in genuine talent or worth characterizes much of the early sociological literature on this topic. For Ferris, much of the existing literature paints celebrity and celebrification --a process by which celebrities become more central to the organization of culture-- as a cultural or individual pathology, or as representative of the encroaching commodification of the individual. However, more recent work in celebrity studies focuses on the interplay between celebrities, fans, and the media, and the construction and presentation of celebrity.

This shift stems in part from the rise of audience and fan studies, which examined the process by which fans engaged with cultural products, including celebrities (Gamson 1994; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Jenkins 1992; 2006; Lewis 1992; Radway 1984). In this perspective, the audience is both a consumer of media products and

producer of meanings about those products, meanings which may challenge/resist those intended by the media industry (Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992; 2006). Although some scholars perhaps underemphasized the role of the media industry in framing the audience's process of meaning-making, this theoretical perspective opened up the examination of the relational, performative aspect of celebrity (Adler and Adler 1989; Baym 2012; Beer and Penfold-Mounce 2009; Gamson 1994; Giles 2000; Harris and Ferris 2009; Vannini 2004).

Research on microcelebrity follows in this vein, and examines celebrity as a self-presentational strategy individuals perform for an audience of unknown others (Marwick 2010; Marwick and boyd 2011; Senft 2008). In her work on cam-girls, Senft (2008) described it as an entirely "new style of online performance" (p. 25) through which individuals present themselves to audience of unknown others while fostering a sense of intimacy between them. In this sense, the performance of microcelebrity consists primarily of performing a self as a consumable object by creating and disseminating personal information about oneself (Marwick 2010).

As self-presentational strategies, microcelebrity and self-branding both contradict and complement each other. On one hand, self-branding gives individuals control over their image, allowing them to stand out in a competitive labor market, while pursuing a more authentic self (Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008b; Marwick 2010). On the other, by constructing authenticity as self-promotional, the self-branding discourse imposes limits on the range of acceptable selves and self-presentational strategies. As such, the incitement to stand out, to self-promote, and to ensure one's visibility encourages a microcelebrity disposition "in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is

maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (Marwick and boyd 2011: 140). The terminology bloggers use is suggestive of this trend. Even among people who know each other, the blogging platform creates a hierarchal relationship between bloggers and readers (Hodkinson 2007). On social networking sites, the individuals in one's network are referred to as "friends." On blogs, one does not amass friends, but followers, "suggest[ing] a hierarchy, almost a religiosity, in the relationship" (Chittenden 2010: 514). However, the performance of microcelebrity requires consistent audience management through the disclosure of revelations and personal information, a task which may easily blur the impression of a cohesive self-brand.

In their research on subcultural celebrities' use of blogging as a tool of self-promotion, Chin and Hills (2008) refer to these practices as "restricted confessions": they give the illusion of intimacy while still confirming the blogger's status as an insider, authority, and holder of privileged knowledge. However, although celebrities' social media accounts are popular, the appeal of many "microcelebrities" is not that they are insiders and experts, but that they are so-called "ordinary people" (Chin and Halls 2008; Marwick 2014; Marwick and boyd 2011; Senft 2008). This is the case with personal style blogs, whose appeal often lies in the blogger's reputation as a fashion outsider (Pham 2013). However, the microcelebrity disposition still entails the "production of cultural content in an attempt to claim a certain status position" (Marwick 2010: 57). In many cases, bloggers do not become micro-celebrities because they are privy to expert knowledge, but because they perform a noteworthy, aspirational self. For instance, the young women Senft (2008) studied garnered their audience by posting live streaming

video of themselves at home. The appeal of these websites was the purported glimpse into the private life of a "real girl." The cam-girl's appeal lies not in her talent or expertise, but in being herself, or at least a particular version of herself which she presents to her fans.

The legitimacy of microcelebrity as a self-presentational strategy is confirmed by social media, celebrification, and brand culture. Marshall (1997) suggests that the popular idea of celebrity evokes the myths of meritocracy, self-improvement, and individualism. According to these myths, celebrities reach their positions by virtue of some exceptional talent or merit, which is recognized and rewarded by the public. As such, the discourse of celebrity resembles the discourses of self-branding and the liberatory potentials of Web 2.0. On the surface, the Internet allows for a further democratization of celebrity (Kjus 2009; Young 2004), by allowing individuals to bypass the forces of the culture industry, and both create and disseminate their own cultural products. There is no need to be "discovered" when individuals have the tools to popularize themselves. However, celebrity is not always earned through merit, and while microcelebrities may have devoted fan bases, they tend to be restricted to small, specialized audiences (Chin and Hills 2008; Ferris 2010). If one defines celebrity in part by media visibility (Driessens 2013), greater visibility still requires legitimation by mainstream cultural institutions, in the form of magazine features, television appearances, or book deals (Andrejevic 2004; Chittenden 2010; Marwick 2010). In the following section, I discuss how bloggers perform microcelebrity by making claims to authenticity and visibility.

Between "a Regular Person and a Celebrity"

When comparing personal style blogs with traditional fashion media like magazines, the latter might seem to have the upper hand. Fashion magazines employ professional writers and photographers who have insider access to the fashion industry, and the closets of *Vogue* or *Women's Wear Daily* are far more extensive than any individual consumer's. Despite this, bloggers cited several reasons why blogs might be preferable to traditional fashion media. Blogs are updated more frequently, and many people prefer the convenience of digital content over carrying around a magazine. More than this, though, bloggers have value for their audience to the extent that they can both present a lifestyle which the audience defines as worthy of visibility, or *blog-worthy* and at the same time appear as an authentic "real" person.

As fashion outsiders, bloggers offer readers something that traditional fashion media cannot—an authentic, trustworthy voice. As oxymoronic as it might seem, authenticity is the selling point of the self-brand in consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2012; Keller 2012; Marwick 2014; Lamla 2009). Ultimately, the self-branding performance sells a relationship between the brand and the consumer, and that relationship must resonate as authentic. A self-brand's authenticity does not necessarily stem from characteristics of the individual behind the brand, but from collective negotiation between branded individuals, their audience, current and potential corporate brand partners, and the social norms and constraints which shape the conventions for what is considered an authentic performance of self. Regardless of their motivations, personal style bloggers create content within a context where the boundaries between labor and leisure have been blurred.

As an example, in December 2011, Erin Perez Hagstrom of the blog Calivintage blogged a series of posts sponsored by Ralph Lauren. While most comments were overwhelmingly, even hyperbolically positive, one reader, Kara, expressed distaste with the amount of sponsored content Hagstrom had been featuring:

> Kara: Things are getting prettttttttttty corporate over here. I love your blog but I hate that you shove so many products down our throats :/ [*sic*]

> Hagstrom: oof! i'm super disappointed to hear that! but still, i'm really glad you let me know how you feel. this blog is my baby and i spend countless hours thinking about ways to represent a wide diversity of clothing and designers. it's a balancing act between etsy shops, big brands, local bike shops, and indie designers. i know that i won't always get it 100% right, but i do try really hard to stay true to myself. anyway, i was over the moon when ralph lauren told me they wanted my take on denim and supply because they have cool stuff and i really admire the brand. i picked out all of the outfits (and hemmed and hawed for hours along the way), hoping to get everything just right! i'm bummed you aren't too keen on it, but it means a lot to me that you spoke up about how you feel, and i'm definitely going to spend some time thinking about what you said. [*sic*]

As Kara saw it, Hagstrom's partnership with Ralph Lauren and other major brands was inauthentic. She felt as though she, and other Hagstrom's readers were being used. In her response, Hagstrom took pains to express to Kara just how closely her blog aligns to her sense of self ("this blog is my baby"), the struggle to remain authentic ("I do try really hard to stay true to myself"), and how her partnership with Ralph Lauren aligns with her authentic self ("I picked out all of the outfits…"). Kara and Hagstrom are invoking two different meanings of authenticity. Kara defines it in part as existing outside of commercialized space, and suggests that commodification and commercialization represent an encroachment, a loss of authenticity. However, as Bruner (1994) notes in his work on historical sites as "authentic reproductions," authenticity is at root a social construction, and its meanings result from social negotiation. According to Banet-Weiser, authentic spaces that were once thought to be outside the commercial sphere- are now

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being defined by brand logic. In other words, authenticity has become a brand, and this assumption itself has become taken-for-granted.

Image 3. Outfit of the day from *Calivintage* (2011)

A handful of top-tier style bloggers produce magazine-like content, featuring professional photography, designer clothes, and coverage of fashion industry events. However, the appeal of the majority of personal style bloggers laboring in near-obscurity resides less in their claims to expertise than in their performance of a self that the audience deems authentic. In presenting themselves to an audience, bloggers invite a certain emotional relationship and create a set of expectations. As Joan described, a

blogger is a "combination of a regular person and a brand," or "a regular person and a celebrity," and "…everyone who looks at their favorite bloggers has some mental ratio of how much celebrity and how much regular person you get to be, and if you cross that line they get upset."

Fiona described how she set out to pursue "micro-fame" with a series of "gimmicks." She wanted her blog to appeal to a wide audience. As she put it, "What's a gimmick without someone to observe it, you know?" When I interviewed her, she had recently turned 18, yet was already a veteran style blogger and microcelebrity. Her choice of words ("gimmick") implies that she saw her practices strategically, a way of standing out for the sake of standing out. As she described her experience:

> During my earliest stages of pursuing micro-fame, I developed so many strong, consistent gimmicks because I wanted people when they discovered me to feel endeared to me in a way, that they felt, like, an inside joke with me. So I'd constantly talk about buffalo wings or like, random stuff like that, or some TV show that nobody watched so then if they ever did see buffalo wings they'd think of me and they'd think, "I'll twitpic this and tweet it at her," and they'll feel like they're in on my joke and they'll feel so endeared to me that they'll want to support me. That's the development of a brand, that you associate certain key words and certain ideas with a person, and if you present them in a way that's humorous or nice or well-meaning, or you're enthusiastic about it, people will want to make you enthused because people get pleasure out of making other people happy, so that bonds you to that person for a very long period of time.

In promoting certain "gimmicks," Fiona consciously cultivated a particular image to elicit a response from her audience that would make people "endeared" and "bonded" to her, and wanting to connect to and support her. By comparing her self-presentation to a gimmick, she implies that it is in part a contrivance. She may genuinely enjoy buffalo wings, but she discloses this information strategically so as to make people feel endeared to her. If we ground our ideas of authenticity on self-directedness or genuineness, Fiona's actions seem inauthentic. However, this assessment overlooks the constructedness of

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authenticity, and the collaborativeness of this construction. In their research on reality television viewers' consumer practices, Rose and Wood (2005) counter the idea that authenticity necessarily equates to genuineness, or is a quality of an object itself. This does not mean that authenticity is no longer important in consumer culture. In fact, it might have even more significant as a means of stabilizing an unstable self.

Reality television rose to popularity under the same conditions as web camming (Senft 2008) or personal style blogging. In all these cases, people began to see surveillance as pleasurable, desirable, a way to express oneself, and to potentially achieve fame and fortune in the process. The audience consumes these products of surveillance as more authentic than scripted entertainment or highly-polished celebrities (Andrejevic 2003; Rose and Wood 2005). Yet, as Rose and Wood discuss, the authenticity of these products cannot necessarily be ascribed to their indexicality to "real life." Rather, the evaluation of authenticity, and the pleasure the audience gains from engaging with these products, stems from negotiating the tension between the fantastic and the ordinary. Both personal style blogs and more traditional fashion media rely in part on presenting an idealized, aspirational, desirable image to their audience. However, in contrast to the branding of a magazine like *Vogue*, bloggers' value also stems also from their successful performance of authenticity.

Theories of the social self refute the idea of an authentic self as belonging to an individual (Mead 1934). Rather, the audience evaluates the authenticity of the individual's presentation of self. It speaks less to qualities of the individual, and more to the audience's sense that individual actors have the right to present themselves in a given way. For Lamla (2009), the struggle for authenticity is at root a struggle for recognition

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(Honneth 1995). This struggle is exemplified in the idea that when people are true to themselves, they will be rewarded. However, being seen does not necessarily entail being recognized, and being true to one's authentic sense of self may not always be marketable. There is not an affinity between authenticity and blog-worthiness, but a tension. Bloggers establish their authenticity and blog-worthiness through the negotiation between three paradoxical dyads: the individual and the intelligible; the relatable and the aspirational; and the accessible and the consistent. The tension between these demands means that performing microcelebrity increases the fragility of the self.

Individuality vs. Intelligibility

In their research on personal style bloggers, McQuarrie et al. (2013) frame bloggers' actions within the "demotic turn" (Turner 2010), whereby ordinary individuals have increasing access to tools which can amplify their voices. Thus, bloggers do not rely on institutional legitimation but gain legitimacy through their display of cultural capital by presenting themselves as a tasteful person. However, for many, it is not enough to wear the right clothes. One must be the right person, and in the right way. The expectation to promote oneself in a culturally understandable way underlies the tension between individuality and intelligibility. Bloggers must manage the tension between presenting themselves as unique, genuinely motivated people through self-disclosure and backstage access, and presenting a self which their audience sees as legitimate within the field of fashion.

In interviews, participants repeatedly said that personal style bloggers are "real." At root, a good blogger must be motivated by a deeply felt passion for fashion and style,

and that passion should be evident on the blog. As Vince put it, "what makes a good blogger is someone who really cares about saying something and not just being a product. You really have to be a person and not a product." As Danielle described in the following anecdote about finding a blog with the same name as hers, individuality entails a certain amount of self-disclosure and originality:

> The other day, my husband told me there's another blog with the same name as mine that came up in his Google alert and I was like, "Oh no." I Google it, and the blog came up, and I could not find a picture of this person anywhere…. She had a Facebook page, but it was not connected to a personal page. I still don't know who she is or what she looks like, so that was like, okay, this isn't very authentic if you can't put your face on it or have an About Me section that says, "This is where I'm from, this is what I do and why I do it." …it felt fake when you can't even find a picture of a person or anything about them and it's really focused on having ads and different things on the blog instead of about a person and a purpose… Especially if it's a fashion blog or a style blog because at the end of the day, you're sharing your passion for fashion and if you're not in it—even if it's a craft blog, if you're not anywhere in it, then what are you doing, you know? If you're afraid to put yourself out there.

For Danielle, the blogger was not unique, and did not disclose enough information. She could not get a sense of the "person and [the] purpose" behind the content, and thus, the blogger felt inauthentic to her.

Danielle and Vince give voice to the meritocratic ideals that inform much of the rhetoric behind blogging. As they see it, a successful blog is an authentic blog, and an authentic blog is one where the blogger's unique voice is clearly heard. This theme was common in advice given to bloggers attending the IFB. As they were repeatedly told, the key to success was to, "Be interesting, unique, and authentic. The IFB blog contains daily inspirational quotes like, "Be so good they can't ignore you," or, "Discover your own paradise":

As the blogosphere becomes more and more saturated, one thing that keeps on coming up is the question, "How do I stand out?" While the answers can vary from having a strong voice, commitment, branding, etc… the one thing that everyone who stands out is that they've found their own paradise through their passions. Finding your own paradise will carry you through all the tough parts of launching your own blog, and sticking to it. If you love what you are writing about and it makes you feel good about yourself and what you are doing for your community, then you have a greater chance of working hard to make it thrive. (Jacob 2013a)

Jacob claims that the influx of blogs in recent years should not concern the, incipient blogger. Good bloggers are idiosyncratic enough to stand out from the crowd. They bring something unique to the conversation that nobody else has—the only challenge is to properly communicate that passion and that voice. Similarly, in a post about voice to the INDIE E-conference, Elizabeth Morrow of *Delightfully Tacky* said:

Bring your voice to the blogging community because no one has your voice, it is 100% yours. If you look around the proverbial blogging room and feel like you have nothing unique to offer, just think about how you are totally unique. There is no other blogger (or human being, for that matter) who can be you- who can say things the way you do, who has the life experience you have, who has the same creativity as you do. That's important! Never forget it.

As Hilary Rushford of *Dean Street Society* stressed on one IFB panel, while some may bemoan the over-saturation of the world of personal style blogging, "There's always going to be another masterpiece." In saying this, Rushford and others who emphasize the significance of content attribute a blogger's professional success solely to the quality of his or her blog. The cream rises to the top. If a blogger works hard enough and is special enough, he or she can achieve a level of prominence within the fashion industry. This discourse was revealed in a post on the IFB blog, "Bloggers and Body Image: Are We Helping or Hurting Ourselves?" In this post, author Taylor Davis asked why, if style blogging "first emerged as this great, democratic platform for all people to explore

fashion and style," the bloggers who stand out and gain recognition tend to resemble the

kinds of people typically embraced by the fashion industry:

> From blogger networks to editorial features, magazines and brands are scrambling to capitalize on bloggers' success--but within their standards. To break away from these traditional molds of beauty, it's not an argument of sheer numbers. The numbers, we got. The truth is, these 'top tier' bloggers are not only equipped with camera-ready looks, but their blogs are also *really good*. They have high-quality images, consistent posting schedules, spot-on design and unique style. In order for a more holistic image of fashionable women to permeate the top tier of blogging as well as traditional fashion media, there needs to be a serious commitment to higher quality content. Plan and simple--there aren't enough insanely good blogs that are run by these types of women. (Davies 2012)

Davies is not alone in attributing bloggers' mainstream success and visibility to

qualities of bloggers themselves. However, as one blogger, Becky, noted, quality and

"uniqueness" is not a given:

> …from the conference, they talked about how saturated the Internet is with wanna-be fashion stars. And I have vintage fashion bloggers that I love, and some of them are so similar to me, in a way. I mean, there's one that, a friend of mine, I was showing them the blog and they said, "Is that a picture of you?" and I said, "No, no, look closer. She's younger and thinner and she's way cuter than me. She's me, only cuter!" (laughs)

As Becky notes, being true to oneself is not enough to make a person stand out.

The popular discourse of democratization obfuscates the constructedness of taste, and

emphasizes how democratic a platform blogging really is while still validating fashion

insiders' status as cultural gatekeepers. In seeking validation from the fashion industry,

bloggers are constrained in the way they present themselves. They are constrained by

both reader expectations and brand obligations.

Rocamora (2011) suggests that personal style blogs act as a mirror in which

bloggers reaffirm the legitimacy of their self-brands. Readers may not directly contradict

the bloggers' presentation of self, but a lack of comments or page views speaks just as

loudly (Chittenden 2010; Hodkinson 2007; Rocamora 2011). Thus, bloggers recognize

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the strong impetus to live up to a branded image which draws on culturally recognized norms of identity and self (Rocamora 2011; Woermann 2012). Individuals thus construct selves, which are at once ordinary and extraordinary, marked by marginal differentiation and the cultivation of what Rosen (2007) refers to as "monotonous uniqueness... conventional individuality... distinctive sameness." Even in the face of fewer institutional pressures to conform to personality norms, the need to stand out in a socially intelligible way can lead individuals to draw on those norms in order to have their performance of self validated by others. This pressure ultimately reproduces norms about which bodies are worthy of visibility, and under what circumstances. However, the emphasis on individual talent undercuts critique.

As Banet-Weiser (2007) describes in her research on Nickelodeon, within postfeminism, race and gender are constructed as "flavas"— flexible, commodified, depoliticized identity categories which stems from the products we buy. Conceptualizing race as a consumer identity statement divorces of racial categories from their social and political implications. "Postracial" diversity thus repudiates the need for identity politics, at the same time it capitalizes on nonwhites' status as the other. When bloggers talk about race, they rely on this kind of postracial language. Sarah, for instance, acknowledges that the fashion media reproduces whiteness as desirable, but when explaining the popularity of blogs by modelesque white women, she refers to the logic of postracialism:

> I mean, I guess, I do look at like, a lot of fashion ads and anything in advertising, it's usually a very attractive white person, so maybe that's why? Or maybe girls that are thin and pretty are more confident and better in front of the camera, or more likely to want to show themselves off.... I don't really think about race or gender. I think about blogs that inspire me and someone's style, I don't ever think, "I need to go find a black girl." (laughs)

Similarly, Nick, a mixed-race blogger, disregarded the impact of race on his

potential for success:

> Um, I think I'm a good looking guy, so I think that I wouldn't have that problem
> of race because people would be more accepting to different, diversity and
> everything like that. I think in terms of looks, in terms of attractiveness, I think
> that is what pulls people in because, "Oh, this guy's really cute, oh, I love his
> style, this guy's really cute, I wish I had a boyfriend like this or a girlfriend like
> this." You know?

Other non-white bloggers described feelings of being tokenized. Faith felt that

being a woman of color helped her career as a plus-size blogger because, "It's more

acceptable to be a larger person and feel good about yourself if you're non-white than if

you are white." While she did not feel discriminated against, she noted that she

sometimes felt tokenized when approached to work with fashion brands:

> I feel like a lot of time there are these tokens. The fashion world might pick out,
> "Okay, we're going to have the black girl, the fat girl, the gay guy." You know,
> that kind of thing, where, "We're covered." You know. So I think it helps because
> you can't deny hardcore numbers, traffic, analytics—you can't deny it. So they
> want it, they want the attention associated with this blog or that blog or that
> blogger, but they're going to recognize the few that are the token people.

Fashion brands cannot deny the purchasing power of non-whites and plus size

consumers, and bloggers like Faith can provide a bridge for them to reach those

consumers. However, Faith remains skeptical of how deeply brands are committed to

providing platforms for non-white, plus-size, and queer bloggers, feeling like she and

others were included as tokens.

In presenting themselves online in a public forum, bloggers make a claim to their

right to validation and recognition. However, these claims can only be granted by an

affirming audience. Although bloggers are told that their value lies in being true to their

"authentic self," that self is only valuable if the audience perceives it as valuable. Despite

the claims that bloggers blog "for themselves," blogs tend to follow very prescriptive

norms regarding acceptable layout and content. These norms have become widespread

enough to become the butt of a number of blogger in-jokes. The fashion blog *Refinery

29's* blogger tongue-in-cheek flowchart "How to Become a Star Style Blogger" illustrates

this point well (Wang and Geraldi 2010). The flowchart instructs bloggers on exactly

how they might dress (in a cage skirt, Jeffrey Campbell platform shoes, and Alexander

Wang clothing), pose, take pictures, and design their blog to ensure their success, which

is ultimately measured by validation from the fashion industry ("You know you've made

it when... you've been drawn by a fashion illustrator," "a brand has shot you for their

campaign," or "a designer has named something after you.") If greater visibility is

predicated on validation by the fashion industry, those bloggers who are more easily read

as "fashionable"—white, thin, young, and rich—have a greater likelihood of achieving

visibility. Because a lack of visibility entails a lack of self-validation, bloggers need to

manage the tension between being individual enough to stand out from the crowd, and

intelligible enough that their readers will understand them as worthy of visibility.

Relatability vs. Aspiration

At a panel on the business of blogging at the February 2011 IFB conference,

moderator Vahni Georgoulakos of the blog *Grit and Glamour* asked whether or not

bloggers are qualified to comment on fashion due to their lack of professional expertise.

Panelist Tony Wang of the blog *Postfashionism* argued that while some blogs produced

quality content, the ease of starting a fashion blog had led to a fashion blogosphere

glutted with amateurs. Panelist Keiko Lynn Groves of the blog *Keiko Lynn* took issue

with this point, arguing instead that bloggers do not need to be experts because they

provide something different than traditional fashion media like magazines.

For Groves, bloggers' value does not lie in their expertise, but in their relatability.

The term originally referred to being able to tell or narrate something, and later, to the

ability to connect different concepts together. More recently, the word now refers to the

capacity to understand or empathize with a person or situation (Mead 2014; Onion 2014;

Zimmer 2010). Bloggers' "relatability" stems from the sense that they are everyday

people with ordinary lives, ordinary budgets, and ordinary bodies. As Sarah put it:

> People who are looking will be like, "This person is just like me." I think that's
> what draws people in, like the whole idea of being regular, like everyone who's
> not like a celebrity or something, you have a regular person. Then it's like, you
> know, I think that's the appeal.

Bloggers' performance of relatability gives the audience a sense that they can use

blogs as inspiration for their own lives. .

Several participants pointed to bloggers' relatability as one of their primary

appeals, citing their "real" bodies or budgetary constraints. For instance, plus-size

blogger Gabi Gregg of *GABIFRESH* wrote on her blog about how unrealistic it was to

expect ordinary people to have the resources to incorporate high-end designer pieces into

their wardrobes:

> We always hear people talking about mixing high and low, but the truth is most
> people can't afford high end fashion. Most of us are trying to find ways to mix
> low and more low [*sic*] and still look chic. I love seeing Chanel paired with
> HandM as much as the next girl, and I die for great designer sale, but I think it's
> kind of out-of-touch to think someone can't look great wearing inexpensive
> pieces head-to-toe.

Relatability means that the value a blogger produces does not stem from expertise

or institutional legitimacy, but from how closely their experiences align with their

readers'. For instance, Emily Schumann of the blog *Cupcakes and Cashmere* combines

content featuring her personal style, recipes, and DIY projects. She is not in the fashion industry, nor does she have special training in crafting or cooking. One commenter questioned Schumann's blog-worthiness by questioning her expertise:

> She uses boxed cake mixes. That's not too impressive. While she may cover a lot of areas of interest, she doesn't really have expertise in any of these areas and 90% of her "tips" ("have low flowers at a table to encourage conversation") seem stale and recycled from Martha Stewart.

Another commenter came to Schumann's defense, not because she felt that Schumann had expertise, but that her lack of expertise was an asset, saying, "She never claimed to be an expert, and the fact that she uses boxed cake mixes is yet another small thing that makes her easy to relate to." The fact that Schumann is not an expert means that the lifestyle she projects seems more attainable. The reader can more easily relate her own experiences to Schumann's, which made Schumann's experiences seem more real and authentic. However, relatability and a sense of realism are not sufficient to ensure success. Just as reality television viewers may disengage from a show that is "too realistic" because they find it dull (Rose and Wood 2005), blog readers may disengage from a blog that seems too amateurish or quotidian. Particularly as personal blogging has become more mainstream, the standards for blogs have been changing. Paris, who had been blogging consistently for nearly four years when I interviewed her, described a shift in the kinds of blogs people were starting:

> I'll speak candidly, and this may be an unpopular opinion, but I feel like when the second wave of us, 2009, and definitely the first wave, the second wave were kind of the weird kids in school. Maybe we did drama and we weren't that popular. But like, at the last conference I went to, I remember looking at the style bloggers and thinking, "These were the cool kids in high school." And it wasn't the same kind of girls doing it in 2009—the girls doing style blogs were kind of the weird girls in high school, but now it's like, "Oh, that girl was probably homecoming queen."

Paris was describing the tension between relatability and aspiration. Whereas she felt bloggers were once "weird kids," more aspirational, professional blogs were beginning to edge them out. In the days leading up to the February 2013 IFB conference, Jennine Jacob echoed this sentiment, relaying an anecdote from earlier in her blogging career that illustrates the importance of professionalization:

> Back in the day, when I was working on my blog, I spoke with a consultant, who said there were some really great things going on with my blog, but the photos needed to be professional quality, not my little digicam. At the time, no bloggers were using SLR's to take photos, so I told him that it was part of the "appeal" of blogging that I didn't have "professional" looking photos. That was probably the biggest mistake of my career. (Jacob 2013c)

Jacob provided this anecdote as an example for how far blogging had come. From humble beginnings, it had professionalized. Rather than taking pictures with a webcam or in front of a mirror, some bloggers began enlisting the help of professional photographers like IFB speaker Lydia Hudgens. In addition to her work for traditional fashion media outlets, Hudgens worked for several major blogs like *Atlantic Pacific* and *I Spy DIY*, shooting them like she would shoot a lookbook for a high-level fashion brand. Jenni Radosevich of *I Spy DIY* shared the stage with Hudgens, and discussed how she would be photographed in several different outfits in a single photoshoot. What at one point would have seemed inauthentic—taking photographs of several outfits in a single photoshoot rather than photographing a single outfit the day it is worn—has become more acceptable as some blogs have become more integrated in the fashion mainstream.

As Joan notes, the need to be relatable is less important among more aspirational bloggers, who are a mix between "a celebrity and a regular person" and it is up to the audience to decide when a blogger oversteps their boundaries. Justin Livingston of the blog *Scout Sixteen* attempted to straddle this line between "a celebrity and a regular

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person" in the post "Midnight Video," in which he published a video addressing his audience:

> As you can see, it's midnight and I'm alone in my room making a video because I'm *that cool*. I think maybe I'll get some food—probably ice cream—and eat it in the secrecy of my own home so I don't look like an absolute creep. It's a four-day weekend, which I'm super excited about. I'm probably just going to be relaxing and prepping myself for the mayhem that is New York Fashion Week next week. I've got a lot of shows, a lot of parties. It's gonna be awesome but it's gonna be really busy. I will have my iPhone with me so I'm gonna try and take some behind the scenes videos for you guys. It's gonna be really crappy quality because it's with my iPhone, but it is what it is.... If you're around the city--that is, New York City--let me know because I have nothing to do. That is not a joke, that is a literal statement, I have literally nothing to do. So let me know and we'll hang. (Livingston 2012).

In this video, Livingston walks the line between relatability and aspiration. He gives a glimpse into the backstage of his life, letting his readers in on his secret plans for an ice cream binge. This candidness fosters a certain type of relationship with his readers, which he extends later as he invites them to spend time with him in person as he "literally [has] nothing to do." As he talks about his midnight ice cream binge and lack of weekend plans, he is self-deprecating, sarcastically telling his audience how "cool" he is. Alone, revealing this ordinary, unglamorous side of his life may damage his claims to "blog-worthiness," but he balances these disclosures with his plans of working at New York Fashion week. With this, Livingston balances the quotidian with the glamorous, the realistic with the desirable.

As Mears (2012) notes in her ethnography of fashion modeling, realism and relatability are not concerns in the field of high fashion, and this can alienate those outside the fashion industry. Bloggers' lack of formal training and experience in fashion

can thus be an asset, particularly for those who do not consume more traditional fashion

media. As Joan put it:

> …there are plenty of blogs that are very aspirational, and these tall, thin, white
> women are given these very expensive things and trot around in them and they
> look gorgeous and it's amazing and I think that people viewed them in the sort of
> same way that they view their magazines, whereas, you know, the bloggers that
> are kind of doing it to see what happens and have slightly crappier photos but also
> more relatable budgets and bodies and personas, it helps us all feel like style is
> more attainable… There are petite style bloggers and tall style bloggers and
> disabled style bloggers and those women really help each other by saying, you
> know, "Here are the resources that I've found. Here are the stores that worked for
> me. This is what I tried and it was great and it might work for you, too."

Bloggers whose sources of legitimacy are more aligned with the field of fashion

may not be concerned with issues of relatability, as their blogs function more like a

magazine. However, those readers who may fall outside of what is considered

"fashionable," may prefer to read blogs by people who look like them. A "relatable"

blogger who begins producing aspirational content may no longer appeal to his or her

audience in the same way. As Joan describes in the above quote, some selves and some

bodies—tall, thin, white, moneyed—are more culturally intelligible within the field of

fashion. Remy described this tension in his experience posting outfits to the outfit-sharing

social networking site Lookbook. Remy himself describes preferring more relatable

"normal looking" bloggers because, "You're not distracted by their like, that they

basically look like a model." However, he does not necessarily think his preferences are

typical:

> …most of the top Lookbookers, they're all like, handsome men. But if you really
> look at the outfits, they're just typical. I'm not saying they dress bad, but it's just
> typical outfits—a t-shirt and jeans. And the ones that are looked down on, the
> ones that are really dressed cool, that really know how to put pieces together, they
> won't notice that because he's a little less attractive.

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Similarly, Fiona suggests that some people are more interested in "a body" than the actual content:

> …there's a huge population of people who are models or aspiring models and people think to get to the hot page, "I can't be fat. Nobody's gonna hype a fat person." What the hell? That's a really unhealthy perspective to have. And they see thin people getting hyped…. The comments are across the board, "You look beautiful, oh my God, I love your legs, your legs are so long, they go on for days. You're beautiful. Hyped for the legs." People are so explicit on why they hype looks. They'll hype it for a body, they're hype it because it's beautiful.

These bloggers' embodiment of glamour and "good taste" through fashionable bodies is enough to ensure their worth and let them stake claim to their right to visibility, and thus, social validation. Others need to earn that right.

Jane's experience illustrates the tension between relatability and aspiration. Singling her out as promoting an unrealistically romanticized and idealized lifestyle, a writer on the website Jezebel remarked how difficult she found it to relate to the lifestyle Jane and others were presenting on their blogs, and compared them with Martha Stewart, who has made an empire producing aspirational lifestyle content. As Jane put it:

> I was very flattered to be mentioned amongst so many bloggers that I admire and to be compared to Martha Stewart, but what I didn't like is how she made it seem inaccessible, saying that we probably spent all of our time doing that and that's why it looked so perfect. I think I live life just like everyone else. I have a full schedule, but I make time to go out and take pictures and blog. It takes a lot of extra effort and I know plenty of people who would never do it, but I enjoy it and so I work hard for it.

Jane responded by writing a blog post which gave a "behind the scenes" look at her life, including photos of dirty dishes and laundry –images which made her seem more relatable. Although she received a positive response from her readers, she later regretted it:

Jane: In hindsight I wish I wouldn't have written it just because I don't like addressing controversy or doing negative posts. I'm not proud of it when I go back and look at it.

Author: Why don't you like doing negative posts?

Jane: I don't know. I just figure people don't like reading that kind of stuff and it takes a certain vulnerability that I'm not sure I want to bring to an online setting.

In her attempts to prove her relatability, Jane provided access to some of the backstage elements of her life. In doing so, however, she made herself vulnerable. When appearing in public, some degree of vulnerability is unavoidable. However, because microcelebrities disclose backstage information in order to appeal to an unseen audience, their selves are at even greater risk. This risk is exemplified in the tension between accessibility and consistency.

Accessibility vs. Consistency

Bloggers are accessible literally in that readers can directly contact them via blog comments, email, and social media. At IFB, bloggers were encouraged to be responsive to readers' requests and stay in contact with them, providing their personal email or personally reaching out to them. "You have to put your audience first," said Karen Blanchard of Where Did You Get That. "Readers are very sophisticated and they will know if you're putting them first or not." As Jeannine Morris of Beauty Sweet Spot said, "My readers are my friends… I reply to everyone and they come back. And they come back. And they come back… They're the reason that I'm where I am right now." In presenting themselves online in a public forum, bloggers make a claim to their right to validation and recognition. However, only audience affirmation can substantiate this

claim. Thus, bloggers' value lies in part in their capacity to build and maintain a validating relationship and a sense of loyalty and connectedness with their readers.

Practically, bloggers are accessible because they offer backstage information about themselves and their lives. To do this, they include lifestyle content such as pictures from family barbecues or lunch with friends, stories or pictures from their past, or outtakes from photo sessions. Bloggers like Erin Lopez Hagstrom of *Calivintage* and Keiko Lynn Groves of *Keiko Lynn* often feature their families on their blogs. Ashley Ording of *Fancy Fine* occasionally invites her readers out to karaoke with her. During the INDIE E-conference, conference organizer Elizabeth Morrow posted a tour of her closet, while Emily Schumann of *Cupcakes and Cashmere* posted a video of "20 Things You Didn't Know About Me", in which she shared her fear of spiders and a story about breaking her front tooth on a stale Abba Zabba bar (Schumann 2013). As Walker (2005) describes in her research on self-portraiture and personal blogs, by disclosing information, bloggers can develop a relationship with their readers:

> Pseudonymous blogs often play a flirtatious game of peek-a-boo, showing but not showing all. For instance, the pseudonymous blogger may tell us about funny episodes (this guy I saw at the coffee shop!) or life altering concerns (shall I have a child?) in a tone of voice as though she were writing to a close friend. Regular readers come to know the characters and places in the blogger's life. (Walker 2005: 188).

Walker was discussing anonymous blogs, but the same sentiment applies when the blogger's identity is known. She reveals personal information, but she does so in a strategic way. Readers get to know her, but a controlled version of herself.

A blogger may post backstage information so as to give the impression of accessibility, but that information must be shared strategically so as to remain "on brand." As Marwick (2013) notes, the self-disclosure necessary to the microcelebrity

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disposition lies in tension with the need to construct a consistent self-brand. As discussed

in the previous chapter, when bloggers provide access to their private lives, they create a

set of expectations for their audience for which they become responsible. Bloggers who

do not live up to these expectations may be subject to censure. Leandra Medine, for

example, dedicated her blog to the act of "man repelling," which she defined as

"outfitting oneself in a sartorially offensive mode that may result in repelling members of

the opposite sex" (Medine 2010). She had a frank style of writing, referring to articles of

clothing and accessories with terms like "birth control glasses" or "boner shrinkers."

Because she occasionally referred to the way her manner of dress negatively impacted

her dating life, the announcement of her engagement came as a shock to her audience.

Medine anticipated a backlash when she made the initial announcement, and while she

received many congratulations and supportive comments, a number of readers felt

betrayed, pointing to a recent post in which they felt she had misrepresented herself:

> ya it's fine if she wants to keep her life private, but don't LIE. You obviously
> didn't go on a date in leather shorts who put you in a cab after dinner last month.
> And you can still be a man repeller and in a relationship with something like
> "Good thing it's already serious, cus my boyfriend said he would break up with
> me over these studded heels." [*sic*]

Interestingly, the problem was not that Medine's actual dating life contradicted

her persona as a "man repeller," but that she revealed information that contradicted her

brand. As the anonymous founder of the blogging anti-fan site Get Off My Internets

wrote:

> This is an example of how bloggers need to pick a damn lane about what they
> share on their blog. You can't pretend to be single for a year and a half under the
> guise of "personal life is private" and then go announce your engagement because
> you want to "share things" with your readers. When you use that logic it makes it
> sound like you either just want to brag about getting engaged, or you are willing
> to lie in order to keep up the schtick [*sic*] that makes your blog some money.

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Either way, you don't get to act like a defensive little brat about how your fans will react. (partypants 2011).

The problem was not that the Man Repeller had failed to repel a man, but that in continuing to write as a single woman, Medine breached her readers' trust, and did not fulfill their expectations. As a commenter on the GOMI blog post put it:

I always liked that she dressed for herself and not for a man, but I didn't realize that she'd been lying about being single this whole time. But if she was going to develop this single persona, she should've stuck with it, or never lied about it in the first place.

For some of Medine's readers, the problem with her engagement announcement was that she was misrepresenting herself. For others, however, the problem was that she stopped misrepresenting herself—that she was inconsistent in the way she presented herself to the audience. The power for evaluating authenticity lies largely in the hands of the audience, rather than the person constructing the brand. Microcelebrity entails bloggers manage their brands by selectively disclosing personal information. However, because the blog platform removes the performance of authenticity from situational context, the demand for a coherent brand increases the risk of discreditation.

Summary

As Joan described, a blogger is a "combination of a regular person and a brand," or "a regular person and a celebrity," and "…everyone who looks at their favorite bloggers has some mental ratio of how much celebrity and how much regular person you get to be, and if you cross that line they get upset." Bloggers' value lies in part due to their claims to authenticity, but authenticity is not enough to draw an audience. To attract and maintain an audience, bloggers need not only appear authentic, but worthy of

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visibility (blog-worthy) as well. Bloggers negotiate the tension between authenticity and blog-worthiness through the performance of microcelebrity, through which the individual manages the audience and his or her branded image by selectively disclosing information about the self. When bloggers grant their audience backstage access, they foster an emotional relationship with their readers. This relationship is the basis of the value of bloggers' self-brands. However, the more information they disclose, the more they risk the cohesiveness of the brand. Thus, microcelebrity entails bloggers manage the tension between contradicting demands: between individuality and intelligibility, relatability and aspiration, and accessibility and consistency.

Microcelebrity is grounded in discourses of meritocracy and democratization which hold that in today's media landscape, success is the result of an individual's hard work and intrinsic value. However, this obfuscates social inequalities which construct some bodies as more worthy of visibility than others. As personal style blogging is further incorporated into the fashion mainstream, the criteria for evaluating a blog's worth are based on how well that blog aligns with normative ideas of what bodies, tastes, and lifestyles are considered "fashionable." Bloggers may also prove their worth by appearing relatable, which allows the audience to empathize with the blogger. However, more fashionable bloggers need not appear relatable in order to be seen as worthy of visibility. Lastly, bloggers can maintain their relationship with their fans through their accessibility. The audience may literally access the blogger by contacting them directly through emails and comments. Bloggers are also accessible in that they foster their relationship with readers by disclosing backstage information, externalizing their inner lives in a bid to keep the attention of the audience. However, the more information they

disclose, the more they put the consistency of their brand at risk. For the audience, consistency to the brand is more important than the blogger remaining true to their own sense of self. As Aubert and Haroche (2011) explain, the injunction to visibility "reduces the individual solely to his appearances." (p. 8).The inner life of the blogger is irrelevant to his or her social validation. Bloggers' value is contingent on building an image which attracts an audience, and living up to that image, regardless of the circumstances. However, the tension between authenticity and blog-worthiness, coupled with a lack of information regarding the audience, further complicates individuals' capacity to gain social validation.

CHAPTER 6: "A PROGRESSION AND A REGRESSION AT THE SAME TIME": HYBRID MASCULINITIES AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SELFHOOD

The vast majority of the four hundred attendees at the Independent Fashion Bloggers conference were women. Of the handful of men in attendance, many were speakers at the event, or marketers sent to capitalize on novice bloggers' hopes for the legitimation of advertising and brand partnerships. A few others came along as support staff for their blogger girlfriends and wives. IFB founder Jennine Jacob announced the special guest for the event—male supermodel Tyson Beckford—to the appreciative hoots of the audience. Attendees would have a chance to meet and take photographs with Beckford later in the day. Meanwhile, they could use the time between panels by having their hair professionally styled, courtesy of Fekkai Salon Hair Products, or have their makeup touched up by a Bare Minerals makeup artist. Later on, attendees would have the chance to receive a free pair of sandals, and would leave the conference toting a gift bag filled with makeup, hair styling products, inexpensive jewelry, and garment tape.

The programming and amenities at this and other fashion blogging conferences highlighted that despite the successes of a number of male fashion bloggers, fashion blogging, and personal style blogging in particular, is an overwhelmingly feminized part of the blogosphere. As Keller (2012) notes, while scholars have long emphasized the cultural association between women and the body (Bartky 1988; Black and Sharma 2001; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003; Tseëlon 1997), scholars of postfeminism further emphasize the body as a site for the production of femininity (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Banet-Weiser 2007; Butler 2013; Gill 2007; Gill and Scharff 2011; Lazar 2006; 2009; 2011). But while it may be true that within postfeminist culture, the body becomes a more significant site for the production of femininity, it is increasingly central for the

production of masculinity as well (Alexander 2003; Bordo 1999; Clarkson 2005; Edwards 1997; Harrison 2008; Nixon 1996; Patterson and Elliot 2002; Ricciardelli, Chow, and White 2010).

Although men have historically been active and enthusiastic participants in the consumer economy, the qualities of consumer desire—hedonism, irrationality—have not traditionally been associated with a rational, disembodied, hegemonic white masculinity (Cieply 2010; Holt and Thompson 2004). However, with cultural shifts toward increasing individualization and the significance of consumption as an institutional field, men's role—in particular, heterosexual, white men's role— as consumers has become more salient (Alexander 2003; Clarkson 2005 Galilee 2002). Still, many suggest a tension between the pressures and pleasures of consumer body projects and the ideal of disembodied, heterosexual white masculinity (Alexander 2003; Bordo 1999; Edwards 1997; Frith and Gleeson 2004; Galilee 2002; Gill, Henwood, and McClean 2005; Harrison 2008; Nixon 1996; Norman 2011; Ricciardelli, Chow, and White 2010; Tuncay and Otnes 2008b). According to Galilee (2002: 42), while men may be subject to new pressures, many remain "reluctant narcissists."

However, much of the existing research on consumer masculinities focuses on white, heterosexual, middle class men with a marginal interest in self-aestheticization. This ignores the experiences of marginalized men, for whom the aesthetics of the body have historically been sources of pride, identity formation, and visibility (Bederman 1995; Kimmel 2006; Miller 2009; Randolph 2006; Wallace 2002). Furthermore, current research on consumer masculinities tends to neglect the productive element of consumption (Toffler 1980; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Ritzer, Dean and Jurgenson

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2012), particularly the way consumer goods are incorporated into the production of a coherent self-brand, through which the self is framed as a form of productive labor (Arvidsson 2005; Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Marwick 2013; Wee and Brooks 2010).

In chapters four and five, I discussed how bloggers present themselves to be consumed as cultural products by a large, unknown audience. Research on culture industry jobs, such as technology and fashion, examine how the performance of a "glamorous" lifestyle can be a form of both aesthetic and entrepreneurial labor, as workers build their self-brands in hopes of achieving "uncertain rewards" in an unstable labor market (Marwick 2013; Neff et al. 2005; Wissinger 2009). A number of scholars have examined how women and girls put themselves on display as a form of entrepreneurial labor, suggesting that qualities of the ideal neoliberal subject—self-determining, self-governing, and enterprising—are not gender neutral (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gill and Scharff 2012; Harris 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007). However, one area that remains undertheorized is how masculinities are performed in this context (Tasker and Negra 2007). We can learn more about the construction of masculinities in this changing cultural and economic landscape by examining what men do as producers in consumptive worlds, and how they frame their own experiences and identities.

In this chapter, I examine how male personal style bloggers understand the way they perform masculinity on personal style blogs. Male style bloggers do not embark on their body projects reluctantly. Rather, they embrace the active, public construction of the male body as consumer project and aesthetic object. I explore what these public body projects mean for the performance of masculinity. I find that bloggers co-construct

gender and sexual identity by presenting a hybrid masculinity to an audience of unknown others. Hybrid masculinities are normative performances of masculinity that incorporate elements of non-hegemonic masculinities. Such a performance relies on gendered, classed, racialized, and sexualized understandings of cultural aesthetics. Self-identified gay bloggers frame their sexual identity as a cultural asset, thereby reifying sexual categories. Self-identified straight bloggers appropriate aspects of gay aesthetic culture in presenting themselves on their blogs, allowing them to distance themselves from hegemonically masculine men's style blogger, while continuing to emphasize cultural ideals of sexual difference and self and identity as individual consumer achievements.

Hybrid Masculinities and Sexual Aesthetics

Much of the scholarship on masculinities over the past twenty five years has relied on Connell's theorization of multiple, hierarchical masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is the most "culturally exalted" (Connell 1995, 77) way of being a man in a given context. Hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic because the system of dominance it supports is culturally embedded at all levels of society. This structure enforces a binary which defines masculinity in contrast to femininity and legitimates masculine dominance.

Because hegemonic masculinity is so exalted, its boundaries are rigorously policed. As Pascoe (2007) notes, even minor infractions can result in a loss of the privileges of hegemonic masculinity through the use of discourses which align the offender with the subordinated masculinities of gay men. This has led scholars to theorize homophobia as key to the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992; Kimmel 1994; Pascoe 2007). In this way, scholars define hegemonic masculinity through

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the negation of subordinated and marginalized masculinities rather than the global domination of women. However, as some recent scholars have noted, in certain contexts, the performance of masculinity may appropriate elements of non-hegemonic masculinities (Anderson 2009; Bridges 2010; Bridges 2014; Ward 2008), creating what Demetriou (2001) referred to as "hybrid masculinities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Anderson's research on young male athletes and fraternity members (2009) suggests that hybrid masculinities construct of a more "inclusive masculinity." Others suggest a less straight-forward reading, arguing that hybrid masculinities allow privileged men to appropriate elements of marginalized and subordinated masculinities. In so doing, they may distance themselves from the stigmatizing aspects of hegemonic masculinity while continuing to reinforce difference and reproduce inequalities (Bridges 2010; Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001). Bridges (2014) theorized "sexual aesthetics" to refer to this delineation of cultural boundaries between gay and straight cultures. In his research, he found that heterosexual men involved in progressive political groups appropriated gay sexual aesthetics in taste, behavior, and ideology while continuing to affirm their identities as heterosexual, masculine men.

Historically, white hegemonic masculinity has been constructed as disembodied and rational (Connell 1995; Thompson and Holt 2004). As Davis (2003) suggests in her research on cosmetic surgery, contemporary men's interest in aesthetics is often pathologized for failing to fit the discourse of the "rational man" as hegemonically masculine. In this discourse, the body is a tool controlled by the mind—it "'does' but is never, never 'done to'" (p. 127). Thus, whereas working class, non-white, and sexually non-conforming men experience, the body as a site for claiming worth and dignity

(Bederman 1995; Kimmel 2006; Miller 2009; Randolph 2006; Wallace 2002), celebrating identity (Kates 2002), and queering boundaries of race and gender (Miller 2009), white, middle class, heterosexual men find concern for appearance as feminizing, degrading, and wasteful.

However, consumer body projects need not contradict the performance of hegemonic masculinities, as heterosexual men reframe their body projects as an investment in achieving normatively masculine goals of economic or romantic success (Barber 2008; Holliday and Cairnie 2007; Tuncay and Otnes 2008b), or as a means of correcting a misalignment between gender identity and an insufficiently masculine body (Holliday and Cairnie 2007). Thus, these projects may actually serve to reinforce symbolic boundaries, particularly with the increasing significance of the self and body as projects in contemporary western culture. In the following section, I discuss how the discourse of self-branding constructs self and body as sites of entrepreneurial labor, and examine the role of digital technologies in the imperative to self-brand.

Consumption and the Masculine Body

In a society organized around the logic of consumption, neither self nor identity can be taken for granted. Individuals must engage in a continuous process of self-reflexive identity construction (Featherstone 1991; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Gimlin 2002). The body is a key site for this process as it is shaped, maintained, aestheticized, experienced, and inscribed with symbolic goods which communicate an individual's lifestyle and identity (Featherstone 1991). As Zukin and Smith Maguire (2004) note, "There is a perceived ideological fit between the self-managing, enterprising, choosing

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self and the model citizen of neoliberal societies who shoulders the responsibility for maintaining social order through his or her 'good choices'" (p. 182). In other words, the ideal citizen is a self-surveilling, self-governing consumer citizen, and much of this self-governance is directed toward the body (Sender 2006). Technologies of surveillance, such as blogs, extend the capacity for self-surveillance, and constitute a moral duty (Banet-Weiser 2012) to construct oneself as both a consumer and producer, incorporating consumer products into an identity project, or self-brand. Consumption both enables and constrains identity construction. Hypermodern individuals are expected to construct an individual self with mass produced commodities. But when they make the wrong choices, they not only risk their social standing, but their sense of self and well-being. The need for visibility and validation constrains how individuals engage in body projects, so as to be both "ordinary and extraordinary." Within this context, the body is seen as ever more malleable in the continuous project of the self.

However, as Davis (1995; 2005) notes, historically, some bodies have been seen as more malleable than others. Those whose bodies are deemed flawed or abnormal, such as women and ethnic minorities, have been under increased pressure to take action to normalize their body (Davis 1995; 2003; Gimlin 2002; Peiss 1998; Wee and Brooks 2010). As many feminists have argued, this impetus for self-surveillance and maintenance has historically been a requirement of femininity (Bartky 1988; Black and Sharma 2001; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003; Tseëlon 1997). Yet, although self-aestheticization has historically been constructed as the purview of femininity, men increasingly enact masculinity by appropriately using consumer goods to achieve a

stylishly-dressed, well-maintained body (Bordo 1999; Frank 2014; Gill et al. 2005; Holliday and Cairnie 2007; Patterson and Elliot 2002).

In a 2002 *Salon* article, Mark Simpson coined the term "metrosexual" to refer to men invested in turning the gaze on themselves. As he described the metrosexual, "He might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference." He explained:

> For some time now, old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism. The stoic, self-denying, modest straight male didn't shop enough (his role was to earn money for his wife to spend), and so he had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image — that's to say, one who was much more interested in being looked at (because that's the only way you can be certain you actually exist). A man, in other words, who is an advertiser's walking wet dream.

Advertisers jumped on the opportunity to market to this new type of men. However, almost as soon as the metrosexual was named, a backlash began against metrosexuality in favor of more "authentic" non-commercial masculinities (Ervin 2011). However, while media outlets have declared the death of the metrosexual too many times to count, the cultural changes which gave rise to this figure have not gone away.

The emphasis on the body as a site for identity construction in consumer society hearkens the rise of makeover culture, which frames the body as constantly lacking and requiring transformation (Gill 2007; Weber 2009). This impetus for self-surveillance and maintenance has historically been seen as a requirement of femininity, but increasingly, the male body, too, is seen as requiring constant attention and improvement (Bordo 1999; Gill et al. 2005; Patterson and Elliot 2002). Within makeover culture, masculinity is constructed as a bodily achievement, to be constructed through the use of appropriate

consumer goods to achieve a stylishly-dressed, well-maintained body. However, as Galilee (2002: 42) notes, while men may be aware of these new pressures, many remain "reluctant narcissists," wanting to fit in and live up to changes in men's fashion, but lacking the self-reflexivity and vocabulary to discuss style and objectify themselves in this way.

Media sources have provided a roadmap for negotiating this shift, constructing masculinity largely in terms of appearance and knowledge regarding the "right" products to help the reader fulfill his role in consumer society (Alexander 2003; Clarkson 2005; Patterson and Elliot 2002; Ricciardelli et al. 2010). The television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* provides a clear example of the role of the media in facilitating consumer masculinities. *Queer Eye* featured five gay men guiding hapless straight men through their new role as consumers, positioning gay men as holding a privileged knowledge of consumer culture based on their embodiment of a subordinated masculinity. On *Queer Eye*, the male body is constructed as malleable, in need of styling products, salon services, a gym membership, and a renewable wardrobe (Clarkson 2005; Sender 2006). In the same way women's makeover shows ad magazines produce anxieties regarding the fulfillment of femininity, shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and men's lifestyle magazines like *Men's Health*, *GQ*, and *Maxim* produce unique anxieties about masculinity which advertised products will presumably be able to quell. In creating these anxieties, the media attempts to disentangle body projects from an association with femininity, signifying that "looking the part" is a significant component of normative masculinity, thus pressuring men to engage in body projects as a part of their identity projects.

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However, while many have examined media portrayals of the consumer masculine ideal in men's magazines and makeover shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, fewer have studied the experiences of self-identified masculine men. As both consumers and producers of fashion media, men's personal style bloggers provide a unique opportunity to examine how certain types of men produce themselves in this changing consumer landscape. Drawing on a subset of 299 blog posts from nine men's style blogs and interviews with nine men—eight bloggers and one participant on men's online style forums[1]--I examine how bloggers perform masculinity, and the implications of personal style blogging for normative masculinity.

Masculinities and Entrepreneurial Selfhood

In January 2012, Ben Galbraith of the blog Kolonel Mustard posted a video to his blog. It opens on a train passing through the frame against the soundtrack of an indie rock cover of Madonna's "Burning Up." On the train platform we see Galbraith, in a varsity jacket, collared shirt, v-neck sweater and wayfarers, milling about and looking insouciant. He pops the collar on his jacket. The camera zooms in on details of his outfit and his surroundings, going artistically in and out of focus. At the end of the video, he looks directly at the camera, unsmiling, and walks toward the viewer before the screen goes black (Galbraith 2012b).

Rocamora (2011) suggests that fashion and style blogging paradoxically serve as a site for both the internalization of male gaze and the construction of active feminine subjects. Personal style blogs provide a site for women and girls to self-objectify, which reproduces the association between femininity and appearance. However, because

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women operate these blogs themselves, they have control over their own self-construction. For Patterson and Elliot (2002), the mainstreaming of consumer masculinities suggests an inversion, whereby men, too, come to see themselves as objects of the gaze. Personal style blogs also complicate the gaze. In offering themselves as objects for their audience, male style bloggers take on a feminine subject position, all the while also retaining some control over this self-construction. Galbraith and other male style bloggers turn the lens on themselves, offering themselves as fashioned bodies for their audience. However, they do so in ways which often reproduce white, middle-class, heterosexual masculinity as the norm.

Marwick (2014) described how people in male-dominated Silicon Valley tech industry used their digital presence as a way to promote their brands in hopes of achieving greater visibility and opportunity. As she and others (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Banet-Weiser 2007; Butler 2013; Gill 2007; Gill and Scharff 2011; Harris 2004; Lazar 2006; 2009; 2011) have noted, the self-disclosure and self-surveillance demanded by branding is typically associated with feminized approaches to the self. This self-promotion required a balance between disclosing enough information to draw in an audience and be perceived as authentic without doing so in a feminizing way. Thus, many of Marwick's participants were wary of disclosing more "feminized" information, such as discussions about dating or non-tech related interests, in promoting these self-brands. However, men's style bloggers build their brands upon precisely these feminized interests and personal information.

Six of the men I spoke with decided to create and maintain a personal style blog because it provided a means for creative self-expression. For instance, Marcus, a blogger

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with some artistic background, compared getting dressed to painting: "I see myself as a canvas, so whatever I wear, I'm painting myself the way I feel. I try to satisfy my creativity through fashion and the way I dress." However, beyond self-expression, all the bloggers I interviewed also admitted they blogged as a means to capitalize on the self. In keeping a blog, they hoped to gain entrée to glamorous fashion industry jobs, working as photographers, stylists, brand marketers, or even launching their own clothing lines. Nick, for example, hoped that blogging would help him break into the fashion industry without going back to college for training in fashion:

> I had a couple of friends who are bloggers and I've always looked at different blogs like Fashion Toast and Bryan Boy. Those were the two actually that I knew of. I was like, "How are they so popular and how did they do this?" Because they didn't go to school for fashion, they were just really knowledgeable about fashion and all they did was blog and shoot a style post for their blog and people love it. So I was like, "If they're doing that and doing really well, why can't I do it myself?" That's when I really started to realize, I'm like, "Well, maybe blogging might be an entrance into getting into the fashion industry."

Having seen the success of bloggers like Bryan Yambao of *Bryan Boy* and Rumi Neely of *Fashion Toast*, Nick saw blogging as a way to take charge of his career. When I interviewed him, Nick was doing freelance work in social media marketing with a local vintage store on top of his job as a waiter, an opportunity he attributed to his blog. As Remy described it, blogs are "basically the new résumé, you know? If [potential collaborators] see it, they're like, 'Oh wow, this kid's done this and this and blah, blah, blah, we have to work with him.'"

As his "résumé," Remy's blog not only showcases his skills as a stylist and photographer, but also provides a platform to display his own unique self-brand for launching a future career. As he describes it, "my brand is myself… looking cool while you still have enough money. Looking cool. That's my thing right now. That's my

brand." Remy and others consider the construction of the self-brand as an embodied

project. All the male bloggers I spoke with framed their blogs as a platform for self-

branding. Marcus described his motivations for blogging:

> …I just keep working and focus my aesthetic and people will be along to follow
> you on your journey. It's all about building yourself as a brand because I feel like
> that is the purpose of being a blogger—a personal style blogger, the purpose is
> just branding yourself. It's all about getting known, but at the same time, when
> you're getting known, you need to maybe convert that into cash.

Marcus and the other male bloggers I spoke with saw digital platforms like blogs

or video sharing sites as spaces to promote themselves and be noticed, believing that

notoriety could transform into material success. In contrast to many women I spoke to,

who were often reluctant to refer to their "brands," male bloggers were very consciously

using their blogs as a means of self-promotion. Marcus, for example, wanted to use his

blog as a springboard for starting a clothing line:

> I definitely want to start a brand off my blog in the sense of coming up with
> something in terms of making something people would be interested in, not just
> me wearing clothes, but at the same time so people will have an idea of, "Okay,
> he's going to do something good with this brand if he comes up with a product."
> So I'm just giving myself two or three years to work on myself in terms of
> reputation building and get my stats up.

Men's bodies are no less sociocultural fabrications than women's, but historically,

women's bodies have been inscribed with social meanings in ways men's bodies have

not, and women's body work has been defined as a central quality of femininity (Bartky

1988; Black and Sharma 2001; Bordo 1993; Davis 2003; Tseëlon 1997). However, with

the increasing centrality of the body as a site of entrepreneurial labor, the increase of the

men's market in fashion and grooming, and the imperative to publicly display the self

through digital platforms, men's bodies are increasingly glamorized: seen as malleable,

subject to enhancement, "upgrading," and as an important vehicle to upward mobility.

In her studies of cosmetic surgery, Davis (2003) notes that the media treats men's increased self-aestheticization as a step toward greater equality, men claiming their "right" to self-improvement. However, she questions the very discourse of equality because it erases historic differences and experiences of systemic oppression. Masculinity is defined in part by bodily transcendence and rationality. Thus, cosmetic surgery, and other forms of self-aestheticization, "cannot 'enhance' masculinity for men in the same way it 'enhances' femininity for women for the simple reason that the very act of having surgery signifies a symbolic transgression of the dominant norms of masculinity" (Davis 2003: 127). However, by focusing on the body as a source of material value and a means of promoting one's skills, male style bloggers can frame their blogs in a more masculinized tone, as a form of productive labor. In Barber's (2008) research on white, professional, male salon clients, the maintenance of a "well-coifed" appearance was key to their performance of professional-class masculinity. Similarly, while six of the bloggers I spoke with were unemployed students or worked low-paying jobs in retail or hospitality, maintaining a personal style blog was a way of performing their creative class ambitions.

As discussed in previous chapters, by framing their blogs as résumés, a way of promoting a self-brand, bloggers make themselves beholden to audience expectations. Bloggers who the audience sees as more "fashionable" may have a greater chance of capitalizing on their blogs. Thus, rather than representing a more "inclusive," counter-hegemonic masculinity, the masculinities which bloggers perform more often act as a means of reasserting masculine dominance and reinscribing sexual boundaries by reifying the relationship between aesthetic consumption and sexual identity. As such, men enact

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hybrid masculinities, blurring gender boundaries without posing a challenge to structural inequality. Straight bloggers can capitalize on gay sexual aesthetics in presenting themselves on their blogs while continuing to reinforce sexual difference. Similarly, gay bloggers also reify sexual distinctions by framing their sexual identity as a cultural asset, thereby reifying sexual categories.

The (Hetero)Masculinization of Consumption and the "Typical" Men's Blog

All the bloggers I spoke with described a gradual mainstreaming of men's fashion that reframed a body work as a means of achieving normative masculinity. By positioning themselves as experts and taking on a detached, journalistic tone, a man's interest in clothing could thus be read less as vanity and more as an admiration for quality and artistry. In contrast to the irrational, hedonic feminized "slave to fashion," the male consumer reframes himself as thoughtful, rational, using the body to display good taste and economic success. In this sense, the blogger uses his blog as a platform to educate the audience, serving as an exemplar. Some bloggers welcomed this shift as opening new opportunities for men to embrace fashion—Sigmund, for instance, attributed this change to "human progress." However, others, like Ryan, were critical of how much the norms of masculinity itself had actually changed:

> I think there was a little avalanche in the past decade or so that like, made men more interested in clothing, and then because of that interest men didn't want to feel, you know, emasculated… *GQ* took on this machismo tone and they would talk about style and all of a sudden it was, it was a cool thing and real men know style, it was that kind of—*it was a progression and regression at the same time…* [emphasis added] So on the one hand, we're making progress saying that yes, men are interested in style and that's okay, but at the same time, they've had to sort of dumb it down (laughs) and make it okay, make it manly again.

Ryan and others described a style blogging landscape dominated by macho, hyper-masculine men's style bloggers. As Tom described it:

> …the vast majority of men's style blogs are just hypermasculine, super-masculine, like it's very traditional men's clothing, it's not androgynous in any sense, and at the same time, if you look at the kind of posts that people make, it's all about like, kind of like that almost James Bond aesthetic--like, fast cars, beautiful women, nice suits, nice—like, a good glass of champagne, things like that.

The "James Bond aesthetic" Tom described was not just gendered, but raced, classed, and heterosexualized. This "hypermasculine" approach to men's style frames the dressed body as a site for showcasing—and enjoying—the spoils of a man's economic success, thus reframing an interest in fashion and grooming as a means of achieving normative masculinity.

However, this conspicuous consumption takes different forms, sometimes incorporating elements of non-hegemonic class and race-based masculinities. Ryan and Tom noted fashionable middle- and upper-middle class men adopting styles associated with working class masculinities, wearing work boots, raw denim, and facial hair. However, the high price tag that come with these ersatz signifiers of working class masculinity make them prohibitively expensive for blue collar workers. From Tom's perspective:

> …most people who are buying and dressing this way… they're already working at a white collar job and the fact that they're not in a physical job, they're not a construction worker, but they're dressing in such a way that it's kind of the traditional clothing of a construction worker or dock worker or laborer, things like that, and there's got to be some gender concerns with that choice and the fact that that's popular right now because if not, why would it? I don't think that the only explanation is that it's an attempt to reclaim traditional masculinity, but look at-- isn't one of the big narratives right now that our society is being feminized and stuff like that?

Working class masculinities are as much performance as any other gender display, but these performances are often framed as more "authentic" and "natural" masculinities

(Hennen 2005). Shugart (2008) noted that on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the show's many working class makeover subjects were portrayed as embodying a more authentic, natural masculinity which was out of place in the neoliberal consumer landscape. Professional and creative class men can appropriate signifiers of working class masculinity as a means of performing "authentic" masculinities and easing their anxieties about gender, without repudiating their privileged class position.

Similarly, Remy, Ryan, Tom, and Vince all pointed to the influence of hip hop culture—Kanye West in particular—on fashion bloggers and men's style more generally. As an out gay Latino teen growing up in southern California, Vince displayed an interest in fashion from a young age, while his classmates were indifferent to style. Vince noticed a change when Kanye West became popular among his peers:

> I'd worn skinny jeans, I'd worn my sister's jeans years before, I'd worn weird sunglasses and weird jackets and a weird haircut, and once [Kanye West] started doing that I started to see a lot of kids around me doing the same thing, and a lot of boys doing it and saying because he's doing it or because a lot of artists in hip hop are doing that, it's acceptable and it's something that masculine.

Similar to working class masculinities, black and Latino men are often portrayed as more authentically masculine (Pascoe 2007). However, the discourse of postracialism frames race and ethnicity not as politicized identity categories, but consumer styles which individuals can pick and choose at will (Banet-Weiser 2007; Shugart 2008; Keller 2012; Sender 2006). Thus, as Ryan described, the influence of hip hop culture did not necessarily translate to an appreciation of African American style bloggers, but rather the appropriation of urban black masculinities by moneyed white men:

> I think urban culture, and particularly rappers, especially recently with… Kanye West and now I think even Jay-Z, they started to embrace and experiment with style and designer fashion, um, Kanye West even having his own line. So I think there's another contingency of male bloggers that are into the like, "Oh, turn that

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swag on. I've got my like, bow tie sweater going on today," and all that kind of stuff. So there's different, it's become more masculine, I guess. There was a way to masculinize, to make it a more manly pursuit, to have a style blog.

White bloggers can appropriate elements of hip hop culture as a way of bolstering their masculinity and appearing more stylish, while retaining the privileges of whiteness. However, as Espiritu (2013) noted, "all men are not created equal," and historically, American culture has portrayed Asian men as feminine and degraded. Sigmund, a Filipino man living in New York, described how Asian men's "less masculine features" made them "generally undesirable," and felt that he was denied greater opportunities because of his race:

> …the way I see it, at least as you look at, for example, the roundup on style on *GQ*. You know, the ones who get photographed the most are handsome white guys. Which is, you know, it's—it is what society is now. You know, people like white people. But what I'm also noticing, which I guess works in my favor, is the money that Asia is making and the way Asian people are consuming and you know, the media coming from China and Korea and Japan, it's sort of changing the shape—I think, a significant number of Asian people in Asia and in the west who like designers I like and who can spend even more than I would on things, um, look at my blog for inspiration and that makes me so very happy. If I was white, tall, huge beard, I would start doing just outfit posts and I would get so much more traffic, but no. That's not me, I am what I am. So that's how it is.

Sigmund has been able to carve out a successful career for himself via his blog, and feels that he can serve a valuable audience, but as an Asian man with an androgynous sense of style, he finds himself out of step with the more mainstream white bloggers who are promoted in major menswear media like *GQ*. He suggested that if he fit the mold of the masculine white menswear blogger—"white, tall, huge beard"—he would have a larger audience. However, while Sigmund recognized the marketability of more hegemonically masculine white bodies, he did not wish to emulate what he saw as the "typical" men's style blog:

…the typical men's blog would be, say, a Tumblr blog where, you know, they post things that they really want, and they would gush over a jacket or a pair of shoes as if it were a gadget, you know. "Made so well, limited edition, not available anywhere but I have it." And you know, some pictures of themselves. In a lot of ways, stereotypical womenswear blogs look like they're made by stereotypical women and vice versa.

The power of hegemonic masculinity lies in its capacity to support a global system of masculine domination and feminine subordination (Connell 1987; 1995). Thus, while the contents of masculinities may change, they still sustain a hierarchical gender order. Vince noted the relational quality of masculinity when explaining how the display of expensive consumer items can reinforce masculine dominance:

…the thing about men is we're so confused about our identity because we don't want to be seen as feminine because we don't want to be seen as weak, so we have to follow something that's strong and something that's, you know, the ideal of masculine, which is obviously more dominant… And that's why a lot of male bloggers do things like wear brand names or wear labels because they feel like the money is something that gives them power, and power is what gives them masculinity. Because it's always been the power of man always trumps the woman in society or the role of a woman, and we don't really see how that plays out, but it still does in today's society. And I think it's just funny because it comes out so many ways what we wear.

Vince explains that men want to assert their dominance to mask an insecure masculine identity, and a fear of being perceived as weak or effeminate. Using the body to display material wealth can thus be a means of both expressing one's strength and dominance, and of avoiding discrediting associations with femininity, or gay sexual aesthetics. However, most of the bloggers I spoke with rejected this model of masculinity. Instead, they saw the "typical men's blog" was shallow, posturing, uninspired, and motivated more by a desire to show off than an authentic love of fashion and style. Regardless of their actual successes, those other bloggers were ordinary and unworthy of note. Although the men I spoke with noted a masculinization of men's style blogging, none described wanting to emulate these blogs. Instead, most of the bloggers I

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spoke with framed their own blogging in opposition to what they described as a "dumbed down" hypermasculine norm. By distinguishing between the "typical" men's blog and their own blogs, bloggers establish a distinction that highlights the co-constructedness of sexuality and gender (Bridges 2010; 2014; Ward 2008). In contrast, the bloggers I spoke to referred to taking a more emotional, personal, or "feminine" approach to both blogging and fashion, distinguishing between what they saw as hyper-masculine, stylistically proscriptive menswear blogs from the more personal and adventurous men's fashion or style blogs. As Ryan described his blog:

> I wanted something that again, maybe dealt with menswear from that more feminine perspective where it was just kind of like enjoyable and not like, "Oh, well, you've got to look like this or you've got to get that whatever to be cool and I've got that, blah, blah, blah." Um, because I was seeing a lot of that and I didn't really understand the appeal of men's blogs.

When I asked what he meant by a "more feminine perspective," he explained, "I guess it's an emotion thing, which is very stereotypical [laughs]. Those women and their feelings." Particularly for bloggers who embody normative masculinity, taking on a "feminine" approach to blogging can enhance the performance of masculinity. By publicly engaging in body projects, straight bloggers demonstrate their confidence in their own sense of masculinity while distancing themselves from "typical" men's style bloggers.

Gay Aesthetics and Consumer Masculinities

When I asked, Florian, a straight, white blogger, what masculinity meant to him, he responded that, "…honestly, it just starts with sexual orientation in the literal sense. If I'm attracted to women, I'm straight and then that at least somewhat makes me a man."

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Florian was the only blogger to so explicitly connect masculinity with heterosexuality, but he was not the only one to suggest this association. All the male bloggers I spoke with said that their interest in fashion posed a challenge to their performance of masculinity due to cultural association between fashion and gay sexual aesthetics. As Marcus described, in his birth country in Nigeria:

> I ran into some people and they would think maybe I'm gay or something, just because of the way I used colors and textures and fabrics, and people would be like, "Oh, you're gay." …So I maybe wouldn't wear what I wanted to wear.

Vince even described developing an interest in fashion as a means of performing his sexual identity:

> I started [dressing up] in high school as doing it as a satire of who I was, and being a gay man it was always, we dress better, or that was the notion of it on television or media. So I, when I was younger, or when I was a teenager, I think I did it as an exaggerated point of view because, "This is how I'm supposed to be, and this is how people expect I'm supposed to be," so I dressed it up for them.

Rather than drawing on unambiguously masculine sources of inspiration, seven participants found fashion inspiration from women, preferring women's personal style blogs to menswear blogs, and six participants described incorporating women's clothing into their wardrobes. As Remy put it, "my outfits you could basically see women wearing it too, so that's why I have both followers, like, men and women. Like, there's no limits. I'll wear whatever I want." However, bloggers interpreted the relationship between their interest in fashion and their sense of masculinity differently, depending on their sexual identity. For gay bloggers, occupying a subordinated position allowed them a certain freedom from hegemonic masculine norms. As Vince described:

> I think that a lot of gay man have blogs and have style blogs because there is—we feel comfortable enough or we don't have, you know, we don't feel like we have to prove our masculinity, and I feel like having a style blog if you are a straight male then you do want to keep the masculinity and not the femininity that is associated with being interested in fashion and in style.

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Anthony felt that his sexuality allowed him to be more comfortable in experimenting with fashion, giving him the freedom him to express himself more fully:

> …I think that, you know, because of my sexuality I think that it's easier to sort of experiment and I'm a huge advocate for that. Not because you have to base it on your sexuality, but just to say like, just because you're a guy and have a smaller frame doesn't mean you have to limit yourself to something from Dockers or like, you know, some of the more masculine-driven brands, so to speak.

In contrast, although an interest in aesthetic consumption may carry associations with subordinated masculinities, straight male bloggers find that expressing their interest in fashion can actually enhance their performance of masculinity. For instance, in a blog post highlighting the style of one of his friends, Ben Galbraith of the blog *Kolonel Mustard* performed normative masculinity by describing the time they spend together playing a popular online video game and harassing strangers on game servers. He described how his friend:

> …like me…enjoys exploring his own personal style, and although we both like suits, he has a different take on how and what to wear them with. He knows what he likes and what he doesn't like and is not afraid to wear things that a slightly different than most other guys (Galbraith 2012a)

As Galbraith described it, their mutual interest in style enhanced their masculinity because it demonstrated their self-assuredness and confidence. They were "not afraid" to do things other men might not.

Image 4. Screen capture from *Kolonel Mustard* (2012)

Florian was sensitive to how his interest in fashion, art, and dance could threaten his masculinity. However, after defining masculinity as heterosexuality, he qualified this definition:

> Obviously a majority of my friends are gay and it doesn't bother me in the least. I don't have any negative feelings because of that. I just think whatever—at the end of the day, I just want to be seen as what I am, a straight guy who likes fashion. Even though I don't have any prejudice against gay people, I know there are people out there who do, so you know. It's also a marketing thing.

Kimmel (1994) frames homophobia as a "central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood." However, as Bridges (2014) notes, in certain contexts, being a "very gay straight" by appropriating the tastes, behaviors, and ideologies of gay sexual aesthetics may actually reinforce one's performance of masculinity. As Florian describes it:

…it generally is more so appreciated by women that I do have those traits if I clarify that I'm not gay because, I mean… let me just put it this way. As a girlfriend, who doesn't like a guy who dresses well and will maybe go shopping with her and knows how to dance and be straight, you know? They're favorable characteristics. If you put a different stamp on it, as soon as you get rid of that, I don't really think that's a problem.

Of the men I interviewed, Florian was the most extrinsically motivated blogger.

Initially starting his blog with the hopes of being gifted free clothing, he was sensitive to

managing his brand and his audience's perception of his performance. Several

participants suggested that many men's personal style blogs are geared toward an

audience of straight women. Bloggers who can "cater to a certain female fantasy," as

Anthony put it, may increase their chance of success. The clean-cut brothers behind the

blog *The Hobbyists* routinely draw on this "female gaze." In a sponsored blog post

promoting silk bedding, one brother, Peter Adrian, posted artful, black and white pictures

of himself lounging in bed. The post, which he titled "Pillow Talk," drew fourteen

comments, several gushing about Peter Adrian's appearance and smile, asking, "Y u [*sic*]

so handsome? >.<" or saying, "You take my breathe [*sic*] away! :)"

Photos by: Bethany Struble   Pillowcase by: Paccony   Shirt by: Faded
Glory   Bracelets by: Number A   Shorts by: F21

Some days are better off spent in bed. Today especially. The light peaking through the window just lit the room so beautifully so Bethany and I decided to do a fun little shoot. Not exactly an OOTD or an outfit post at all, just a fun set of pictures today. Hope you guys like it. I'm lovin this silk pillowcase from paccony, stays cool when the weather starts to get hot.

Image 5. Screen capture from *The Hobbyists* (2013)

As Florian described:

I mean, if you're a menswear blogger you can basically offer something for men, because of fashion, you can offer something for girls, because it's fashion for their boyfriends or maybe for them it's just something to look at, and you have also gay people, who I put in a different category because they get the fashion and they get me. They get that too.

Florian takes issue with being perceived as gay because it may potentially diminish the value of his brand. However, so long as he is able to assert his authentic sexual identity as a straight man, his gay aesthetic interests can actually be an asset. In this way, Florian capitalizes on the positive associations of gay sexual aesthetics without destabilizing associations between masculinity and heterosexuality. Similarly to Florian, Remy, another straight-identified blogger, was able to capitalize on gay cultural aesthetics without the attendant questions of identity. He described masculinity in terms of confidence:

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Like, as a straight guy people would assume that I'm gay, being into fashion. But that doesn't really bother me because I know who I am and I know like, what I am and everything. So I have the confidence to just wear whatever I want and knowing that I have that confidence makes me feel, makes me feel amazing. Makes me feel great. Walking around, knowing you get these looks, good or bad, but you know, not ever caring if I'm making a statement or anything, but just caring that I feel good about myself, you know?

Although Remy occasionally receives homophobic emails, in outwardly dismissing them, he shows his masculinity to be beyond reproach:

Masculinity… It's all about knowing who you are. It's not about big muscles or like, if you like, have guns or go to the gym. It's really all about knowing who you are, doing what you're supposed to do like, providing for your family or if you have a girlfriend, loving her, taking care of her, just like, you know, things that are not in the open like that. To me it's all about like, who you are inside, not what you show outside. Like, I could say I'm more of a man than many, like, a lot of these people who are like, muscular or buff or whatever. I go out there every day, dressing however I want and not caring what other people think. It takes a lot, it takes a real man to do all that, you know, to accept who I am.

The confidence Remy and Florian feel in their masculinity stems in large part from their privileged subject position as heterosexual men. In contrast to Remy and Florian, as a young man struggling with his sexual identity, Ryan feared how people would interpret his interest in fashion:

I remember one time when I was, maybe in my freshman year of high school, a friend saying—there was this character on *Queer as Folk* that I reminded her of, and she said because he was interested in fashion we both had that in common, so I was paranoid that I seemed gay… when I was in college I bought my first issue of *Vogue*… I remember being in Barnes and Noble and thinking—I asked my best friend, "I don't know if the cashier thinks I'm gay now."

Linneman (2008) remarks that gay men are made "immanently feminine," regardless of how they act (p. 590) through cultural associations between gay masculinities and the subordinated status of femininity. Even gay men who in other ways perform their gender in hegemonically masculine ways still find themselves feminized by others. Growing up, Ryan found his small stature and sexual identity put his masculinity

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into question. In contrast with Florian and Remy, for whom gay aesthetics could enhance "authentic" heterosexual masculinities, for Ryan, being perceived as gay could have more serious social consequences. Even men interested in fashion sometimes rely on the "fag discourse" (Pascoe 2007) to police other men's masculinity. On one post, a commenter wrote that blogger Ben Galbraith looked like "a fag," and Remy reported receiving a number of negative emails in which the writer called him "gay" or "a fag." As Tom described users of a men's fashion forum:

> …men, you have these expectations that you're not interested in clothing, clothing is just something that you use because it's utilitarian, but men hate shopping and everything about that, and this, the growth in men's fashion is kind of butting up against that stereotype, but there's still a lot of pushback from society, so you'll see people who show up on the forum, you know, and they'll post a picture and it's them wearing sweat shorts and some baggy t-shirt and everyone's like, "This looks terrible, don't do that," and they're like, "Oh, you guys are just a bunch of fags, what are you talking about? The people who post on this website are gay."

Although gay and straight bloggers negotiate masculinities differently in light of their potentially discrediting interest in fashion, these strategies continue to reinforce the symbolic boundaries which associate aesthetic consumption with gay sexual identities. In reinforcing these boundaries, bloggers also reinforce hierarchies which position heterosexual masculinities above gay masculinities. Among men's style bloggers, being a "very gay straight" (Bridges 2014) makes a blogger more marketable, thus enhancing his chances for material success and visibility.

Summary

In contrast with existing research on men and fashion, the bloggers I spoke with were highly reflexive and articulate about their aesthetic consumption. They present

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themselves as branded objects, managing the presentation of those self brands by displaying consumer objects. As such, they embody the "self-managing, enterprising, choosing self" of neoliberalism, taking on what has historically been a feminized orientation to the self and the body. Male style bloggers maintain their blogs as a means of self-expression and a way to capitalize on the self in hopes of gaining entrée to glamorous creative-class careers. However, male style bloggers' reflexivity, self-governance, and public self-aestheticization do not necessarily challenge gendered structures.

All the male bloggers I spoke with described a mainstreaming of men's interest in fashion and grooming. However, while some saw this shift as a mark of progress, for others, it was at once a "progression and a regression" due to the way these mainstream consumer masculinities were racialized, classed, and sexualized in ways which maintained the dominance of white, middle- and upper middle-class heterosexual masculinity. However, rather than emulating normative consumer masculinities, the men I spoke to distanced themselves from these masculinities by adopting gay sexual aesthetics. Gay bloggers framed their sexuality as an asset which allowed them more freedom of self-expression as they pursued their body projects. By appropriating gay sexual aesthetics, straight bloggers reinforce symbolic boundaries and hierarchies of masculinity. Straight bloggers were able to distance themselves from the "typical" men's style blog, while still reinforcing sexual difference. Thus, straight-identified male style bloggers enact hybrid masculinities, appropriating elements of non-hegemonic masculinities in order to distance themselves from the more stigmatizing aspects of hegemonic masculinity, while maintaining their privileged social position (Bridges 2010;

Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001). If performing masculinity is, as Kimmel (1994; 2006) has described it, a mask for covering one's fear of being exposed as unmasculine, flouting masculine norms may actually be a way of demonstrating the inherent stability of one's masculinity.

Note

1. Tom, the first man I interviewed as a part of this project, did not have his own blog. However, I am including him because although he cannot speak to the experience of blogging, several other men I interviewed echoed his thoughts on men's style blogs.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In the run-up to the February 2013 Independent Fashion Bloggers conference, founder Jennine Jacob posed a question on the IFB blog—"Has the fashion blogging bubble burst?" (Jacob 2013b). A year later, *New York Magazine* declared that, "The Golden Era of 'Fashion Blogging' is Over" (Givhan 2014). The message behind these articles, and others like them, is that the democratizing promise of fashion blogging has vanished. But if the "golden era" is over, it is not because the self-documentation practices personal style bloggers engage in are no longer in vogue. If anything, bloggers' self-documentation practices, which seemed so marginal when I began my research, are now a ubiquitous part of digital culture. Photographically documenting the mundane parts of daily life, from the clothes one wears to the food one eats, is the basis of some of the most successful social media platforms. The democratizing promise of Web 2.0 rhetoric may have faded, and blogs may have declined in popularity overall (Lenhart et al. 2010), but the social and cultural conditions that gave rise to personal style blogging have not.

The goal of this research has been to examine how the drive for visibility in digital culture impacts the parameters of the presentation of self in gendered ways. When I began my research, I was interested in what motivated young women and girls to document their everyday life for an audience of unknown others. I wanted to understand why so many people—women and girls in particular—were choosing to self-document through their clothing, and what it meant for women to turn their cameras on themselves. I wanted to know whether personal style blogs might represent a democratization of culture, whereby ordinary women could create and disseminate culture, and wrest cultural control from the mainstream fashion media. Many of the people I spoke with

during my research were optimistic about the potential of blogging to challenge the fashion mainstream and increase the visibility of people who have historically been underrepresented in fashion, such as people of color, plus size people, and queer folk. However, as I continued my research, the landscape of personal style blogging changed. In the beginning, bloggers relied on tripods, mirrors, and their romantic partners in order to take their pictures. But blogging has since become a business. Personal style bloggers write books (Medine 2013; Quirk 2011), design shoes (Aldridge 2009), and make the cover of fashion magazines (Jacob 2015). As personal style blogging changed, the bloggers I spoke with became less optimistic about the potential of blogging to democratize fashion.

As their realities changed, my research changed. I continued to be interested in the motivations behind personal style blogging, but I also came across new questions. I became interested in what value bloggers produce, and what happens to the content they create when these fashion outsiders become insiders. Early on, people praised bloggers for their authenticity as fashion outsiders. However, with the commodification of personal style blogs, authenticity did not become less important, but its meaning became less clear.

Lastly, as I came across more personal style blogs operated by men, I became increasingly interested in what motivated male style bloggers. Much of the existing research suggests that aesthetic consumption is becoming increasingly important to the enactment of hegemonic white masculinities. However, this research tends to stress men's reluctance and ambivalence toward self-adornment. I wanted to know how male

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personal style bloggers framed their actions, what they thought of masculinity, and how they enacted masculinities on their blogs.

The implications of this research stretch beyond the social world of personal style blogging. This project speaks to broader meanings of self, authenticity, and gender in contemporary western culture. In the following sections, I develop the sociological relevance of this project, and summarize my main findings. I then discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses of this study, and make some suggestions for further research.

Sociological Relevance

The meaning of the self has been of central importance to sociology from its earliest years. Symbolic interactionists in particular examine the self as a process which arises in situated interactions (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934; Goffman 1959). Different situations and contexts shape the parameters by which individuals engage in self-presentation, and many scholars have sought to explore the way digital communication technologies impact these parameters (Robinson 2007; Davis 2010; 2012; 2014; Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Hogan 2010; Litt 2012). This project contributes to those efforts by exploring the presentation of self on a one-to-many communications platform like a blog. I go beyond the practices themselves and examine the set of cultural discourses which lead to particular understandings of the self. I locate these discourses and practices in the hypermodern cultural moment, and consider how they are gendered.

Although personal style bloggers may represent a small portion of the population, I chose to study them because their actions are emblematic of the injunction to visibility in contemporary western culture. Personal style blogging is just one means of standing

out in a socio-historical context where traditional sources of self and identity have lost significance, and the self becomes a source of material gain in an insecure economic environment. Yet, as visibility becomes more significant as a means of validating the self, it is less guaranteed. In contrast to face-to-face interactions where visibility is more-or-less assured by appearing on a social stage, bloggers cannot guarantee that by appearing, an audience will see them and validate their claims to visibility. At the same time, by presenting themselves to a broad audience, bloggers risk opening themselves to discreditation and context collisions. These selves are paradoxical: at once unconstrained, and self-contained. This research illuminates some of this drive, the changing audiences, and how it impacts the ways individuals think of and present themselves to this audience.

We draw on culturally intelligible symbols and strategies to construct our selves. Today, the strategies and symbols of self-surveillance and branding are readily available and widely intelligible means for self-construction. The prevalence of self-branding shifts the meanings of authenticity. In the modern era, authenticity was self-directed, meant to be true to an inner core, regardless of the social cost. With the widening of the social stage brought about by advances in media and transportation technologies, the myth of the true self lost credence. Postmodernism did away with the concept of a core self in favor of a more fragmented, relational self. For Lipovetsky (2005), postmodernity was a time to break down the traditional institutions that constrained modernity. In the wake of postmodern deconstruction, modernity can now exist in a new, unhampered form. In the hyperindividualistic, hypercompetitive consumer landscape of hypermodernity, there exists a paradoxical drive toward self-control in order to manage the anxieties which permeate life in the contemporary moment. The actor follows two contradicting demands:

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to enjoy life to the fullest while proactively manage the risk inherent to life in hypermodernity. This paradox is exemplified in the discourse of branding. Rather than seeing the self-directedness of authenticity as being in tension with the other-directedness of commodification, self-branding discourses presume an affinity between the needs of the self and the needs of the market. Self-branding is framed as a way of uncovering a core, marketable self which remains consistent across interactions. However, the concept of a core self is incompatible with the situatedness of the self. Rather than encouraging self-discovery, the discourse of branding encourages self-censorship so as to appeal to a broad audience. At the same time, individuals have little information as to who comprises their audience. As a result, the hypermodern self in is increasingly vulnerable. It is vulnerable to discreditation, when individuals lose control over the kind of information the audience is privy to, or when their self is seen by an audience outside their imagined audience. It is also vulnerable to invalidation, when an audience does not honor an individual's claims to visibility.

The discourse of branding is steeped in a language of meritocracy, but the criteria for standing out reproduce existing inequalities. In branding themselves, individuals implicitly make the claim that they are worth being seen by an audience. Bloggers manage their brands by performing microcelebrity. Bloggers' value lies in their claims to authenticity. This authenticity is not is not self-directed, but refers to bloggers' capacity to present a self which the audience perceives as individual, relatable, and accessible. However, authenticity alone is not enough to validate bloggers' claims to visibility. Bloggers must also be blog-worthy, or worthy of visibility. In other words, their visibility must also be culturally intelligible, or understood as valuable within the given cultural

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frame. Audiences will confer the "blog-worthy" status to those bloggers who are more intelligible within the field of fashion, whose lifestyles are perceived as aspirational, and who can remain consistent to their brand. Using these criteria reproduces inequalities which normalize and grant greater visibility to white, thin bloggers. Those who do not meet those criteria while are relegated to different lower-end niches and must work more to maintain their audience.

Scholars of postfeminist culture describe the centrality of the body as a site for performing femininity. In this culture, the adorned body becomes more salient as a site for the performance of masculinity as well, and in ways which reinforce gender and sexual differences. Drawing on a subset of interviews with male style bloggers and content analysis of men's style blogs, I examine male style bloggers' performance of self-promotional, hybrid consumer masculinities. By displaying the adorned body as a means of self-promotion within an entrepreneurial consumer culture, male personal style bloggers present a masculinity that is in line with the hypermodern drive for visibility. In their self-display and self-surveillance, these men resemble Harris's (2004) proactive "can-do" girls. But while they draw on feminized technologies of the self, they do so in ways which reproduce gender and sexual difference. This speaks to the new forms gendered dominance can take in contemporary society, and the resilience of masculine dominance. As gendered boundaries start to blur, some enactments of hegemonic masculinity begin to incorporate elements of femininities and subordinated masculinities in ways which maintain the dominance of straight, white men.

Symbolic interactionism understands the self as a process that arises through interaction and not a core to be discovered. The more different the audiences for which we perform, the more different the selves we will enact. Gergen (1991) suggested that the expanding boundaries and proliferation of interactions enabled by communications technology would lead to a more relational self. However, the idea behind self-branding reflects a sort of commodified romanticism: there is a core self to which we can be true, and once uncovered, it will align with the values of the market. This self is not the diffuse, situational, relational self of Gergen, but more akin to the hypermodern paradoxical self of Lipovetsky (2005). It arises in a context in which the possibilities for self and identity have proliferated, yet paradoxically, individuals exercise more control over their selves. When the self lacks stable referents, it becomes more fragile and vulnerable to discrediting. Bloggers experienced the fragility of the branded self when they found their selves invalidated, discredited, or threatened by misrecognition and invisibility.

At one point, personal style blogs seemed like fashion outsiders, but is not necessarily the case anymore. When I began my research, I did not predict that personal style blogging would become so well-integrated into the mainstream fashion industry, and that the amateurish blogs I first followed would soon feature professional photography, free designer clothing, and missives from exclusive parties and the front rows of fashion weeks across the globe. Personal style bloggers were not necessarily integrated into the fashion mainstream on the basis of expertise, talent, and taste, but because they were able to connect emotionally with their audience. Unlike corporate fashion brands, personal style bloggers evoke feelings of trust and connection. By

associating with bloggers, corporate fashion brands can access bloggers' emotionally-invested audiences. Bloggers thus act as cultural intermediaries, mediating the relationship between consumers and products not through their institutional legitimacy and expertise, but by the virtue of their claims of authenticity and trustworthiness.

The idea of an authentic self-brand may seem paradoxical. However, the perspective the commodification and authenticity are irreconcilable does not address the constructedness of authenticity. In this research, I have examined how bloggers use the concept of authenticity, and what it means to them. Interviewees and conference-goers did not see monetization as antithetical to authenticity, so long as bloggers partnered with companies that remained consistent with their audiences' expectations. Bloggers set these expectations through the self-presentational practices of self-branding.

When I initially saw the branding discourse evoked at the IFB and INDIE conferences, I was surprised and worried. Some of the bloggers I spoke with were concerned as well. For instance, when I talked to one blogger, Marie, about her thoughts on branding, she responded:

> I think it was Jenny of Fashion for Writers that said, "Why would I want to corporatize my blog?" …I guess the reason I hate this ongoing conversation so much, is that larger companies are controlling this conversation. The IFB and Chictopia conferences happen because companies, like Modcloth and Like.com, are able to sponsor those events. So, at the conference, Like.com and Modcloth talk about how, as a blogger, we all need to brand ourselves so that we're able to attract sponsors to our blogs. And the whole reason to have Modcloth and Like.com as a sponsor? It's so you can make MORE money for Modcloth and Like.com. To me, it all seems like a conversation being controlled by these companies in order to make more money for these companies.

Marie and other bloggers were critical of the sources of the self-branding discourse. Kat argued that the drive to monetize blogs was antithetical to their purpose, which as she put

it, was "real people wearing real clothes." However, she was ambivalent about branding as a way of presenting and understanding the self.

> I agree with the idea that your blog should represent something and if you want to call that a brand, then I guess it can be termed a brand… I've read articles on IFB that aren't necessarily directly talking about how to make your blog professional and branding in terms of you know, focusing your content and representing something very specific, which is great, but um, I think that branding can be independent of branding in terms of marketing…. I wish there was almost a separate term for just focusing your aesthetic and focusing what you represent as opposed to branding for the market.

Despite this hesitancy, many more bloggers embraced branding, thinking of their blogs as a résumé, and treating their self-promotional social media use as like a second job. To brand oneself means to package oneself as a product to be consumed by an audience; but it is also a strategy for presenting the self in a cohesive, intelligible way. In this sense, branding is not much different from other ways of presenting the self. When we interact, we hope that others support the line we have laid out, and we behave in accordance with that line. However, in presenting the self to a broad, unseen audience, individuals lose control over the way the audience perceives them. Individuals may direct their self-branding efforts to an imagined audience, but the publicness of these self-presentations means that they are at increased risk of context collisions. Branding requires that cultivates a cohesive public image that is meant to express a core, authentic self. Rather than frame the idea of an authentic self-brand as a paradox, the discourse of self-branding presumes an affinity between authenticity and marketability. In this way, self-branding becomes a means of self-care, a way of getting in touch with one's true self, and of having some control over others' perceptions.

As a self-presentational practice, branding entails selectively revealing personal information to the audience in order to maintain the relationship with it while also

remaining "on brand." Self-branding shares qualities with any other form of self-presentation. As Goffman notes, when we interact with others, we attempt to manage our audiences' impressions of us by controlling the kind of information we reveal and conceal. However, the parameters for self-presentation on blogs, coupled with the drive to present a consistent self, increase the risk of discreditation. The presentation of self on blogs is removed from situational context. The audience knows more about bloggers than they know about their audience. While bloggers may receive comments or emails from some readers, the interaction between bloggers and their audience is largely monological, not dialogical. Bloggers may attempt to manage threats to the self by compartmentalizing their selves or direct their presentation of self toward an imagined audience. However, the public quality of blogs complicates bloggers' ability to manage their self-presentation. Bloggers engage in preliminary impression management in order to appeal to their imagined audience, but without knowledge of the actual audience, the threat of discreditation remains, Bloggers who go off-brand by thwarting readers' expectations lose the trust and emotional connection they have fostered, regardless of bloggers' subjective feelings of being true to self. Thus, bloggers become beholden to the brand they create, sometimes at the expense of their own subjective feelings of self.

As Axel Honneth (1995) argues, human history is driven by the struggle for recognition: self and identity need to be recognized and validated by another person, and this recognition is the basis for human rights and dignity. In hypermodernity, lacking stable referents for the self, recognition is more difficult to achieve. The struggle for recognition is replaced by the "tyranny of visibility" (De Gaulejac 2011; Haroche 2011), whereby validation is sought through visibility. Visibility cannot be assured online, and it

is difficult to stand out in a glutted media environment. It is not enough for individuals to create content about the self, that content needs to be seen and validated. Despite the discourse of self-branding suggesting that authenticity is the key to success, individuals need to appear not only authentic, but also as worthy of note. Bloggers negotiate this tension by performing microcelebrity.

Between "a Regular Person and a Celebrity"

Through self-branding, bloggers present a cohesive self to their audience. In presenting themselves on a broad stage, they presumes that an audience will be interested in the content they create. However, audience interest is not guaranteed. Regardless of self-help dictums that success comes when bloggers find their "authentic voice" or when they do what they are truly passionate about, an audience must find that voice and those passions worthy of note. Microcelebrity is the performance of this noteworthiness. To perform microcelebrity, bloggers negotiate the tension between presenting a self that is both authentic and blog-worthy, or worthy of visibility.

Microcelebrity is performing the self as a branded good, and bloggers accomplish this by sharing information with their audiences. However, while branding requires consistency, microcelebrity destabilizes that consistency by disclosing more information to the audience. The more an individual discloses—and the larger his or her audience— the more the brand is put at risk. Bloggers' brands are valuable because they seem authentic. Authenticity in this sense does not mean non-commodified, nor does it refer to the subjective experience of being true to self. To be authentic is to be individual, relatable, and accessible individual. However, authenticity alone is not enough to ensure

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one is worthy of note. Bloggers perform a self that is at once individual but intelligible, relatable but aspirational, accessible but also consistent.

To be individual, bloggers must have something original to contribute. They impress this upon their readers by disclosing certain information about themselves. From this information, readers get a sense of the blogger's "unique voice." However, in order to resonate with their readers, bloggers must still be intelligible within the field of fashion. This reproduces inequalities, as bloggers who appear more "fashionable" will be more likely to be validated by the fashion industry.

Bloggers perform relatability when they present themselves in ways with which their audience can empathize. When people refer to bloggers as relatable, they usually mean that they are fashion outsiders and amateurs. Bloggers can be too relatable, though, when the lives they document are too ordinary. Thus, bloggers balance the tension between presenting a life that is relatable, but also aspirational. Aspirational content is more traditionally associated with fashion media. For bloggers who live more aspirational lives, relatability is less important. This reproduces inequalities whereby individuals whose lives and bodies are more in line with normative values of noteworthiness are elevated.

Lastly, in performing microcelebrity, bloggers strike a balance between being accessible, while remaining consistent. In order to foster the relationship to their audience, bloggers need to be accessible—literally, in that readers can contact them through comments, email, and social media, but figuratively, too, in their selective disclosure of backstage information. In disclosing information, they foster feelings of intimacy with their readers, bonding their readers to them. However, the more

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information they disclose, the more they risk appearing inconsistent, thus discrediting their brands.

Hybrid Masculinities and Entrepreneurial Selfhood

Harris (2004), Banet-Weiser (2012), Senft (2008), and others (Atwood 2011; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Butler 2013; Gill 2007; Gill and Scharff 2011; Lazar 2006; 2009; 2011) describe how the self-promotional modes of self-presentation which proliferate in contemporary western culture mesh with the politics of postfeminism. Postfeminism as a cultural stance does not repudiate feminism, but rather holds that the work of feminism is no longer necessary, and that the barriers that have historically held women back are no longer at play. Enterprising, self-surveilling young women and girls are framed as ideal subjects in a neoliberal economic landscape, perfectly posed to reap the benefits of an individualized, entrepreneurial, consumer society. However, as Tasker and Negra (2007) note, there is little research that examines masculinities within postfeminist culture. With this research, I argue that postfeminist culture ushers in a new hybrid masculinities, glamourous masculinities, through which men enact masculinity bodily through the kind of self-adornment typically associated with femininity or subordinate masculinities.

When I started my research, I noticed a dearth of men's personal style blogs. When I asked people why they thought men were not producing personal style blogs, they would say that men just have no interest in clothing. But while fashion is a feminized social field and an interest in clothing has not historically meshed with hegemonic white masculinity, it is not true that men are unilaterally disinterested in

clothing. Indeed, men were blogging about clothing, and some were becoming quite successful (Swerdloff 2012). However, most of these bloggers were taking a stance as experts, and not as personalities, the way most personal style bloggers did. Male personal style bloggers blog about fashion, and they do so in a feminized way, focusing on themselves, their interests, and their own bodies rather than taking a more distant, journalistic stance as experts.

Contrary to research which frames men as "reluctant narcissists," the men I spoke with were highly reflexive about their experiences with fashion. These men's actions are intelligible in a culture which frames this feminized approach to the self and the body as a means of controlling the self and managing economic risk. Gay men saw their sexuality as an asset which made them freer in engaging in their body projects. Straight men found that incorporating elements of femininities and subordinated masculinities into their performance of gender could enhance their own claims to masculinity, while distancing themselves from the "typical" men's style blog, which they derided. In this way, straight men perform hybrid masculinities, appropriating non-normative masculinities into their performance of gender in ways which emphasize sexual difference.

Strengths and Weaknesses

This is not the first research about personal style blogging. However, many of these studies focus on the content of blogs themselves (McQuarrie et al. 2013; Pihl 2013; Pham 2011; 2012; Rocamora 2011), and none to my knowledge include participant observation as a method. With this project, I found it important to combine qualitative content analysis with semi-structured interviews and participant observation in order to

get a sense of the discourses bloggers and their readers produce around blogging, of individuals' feelings about their blogs and these discourses, and of the actual ways individuals present themselves on social media. Doing so has allowed me to situate personal style blogging in a broader context and to understand personal style blogging as a social world, comprised of individuals who may not be directly connected, but who nonetheless collaborate in the creation of symbolic meaning. Using any one method in isolation would not have given me the same breadth and depth of understanding of this world, and it enriched the final product.

However, given greater time and resources, I would have done a few things differently. There are communities of bloggers in major cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco whose members attend events and informal gatherings. While I was able to attend one of these gatherings—a vintage sale in San Francisco—living near one of these hubs would have allowed me greater access to my population and would have given me the chance to see how community can arise around blogging. Several of the people I interviewed stopped blogging sometime after we spoke. Being embedded in one of these communities may have also allowed me to see individuals' relationships to blogging over time.

Living near a larger number of personal style bloggers may have also eased the difficulty I experienced in recruiting participants. I had mixed results soliciting interviews via email. Despite several follow-ups, many bloggers never responded, and I had to face a high level of attrition among bloggers who initially agreed to a phone interview. Meeting bloggers in person may have made recruitment easier, and may have given me access to bloggers with different perspectives. Many of the bloggers I attempted to

contact had large followings, and as Ortner (2010) describes, it can be difficult to gain access to powerful people. The bloggers I ultimately interviewed tended to have some kind of interest in my research—either it flattered them to be included, or they were interested in the kinds of questions I was focusing on. I would have liked to have been able to reach bloggers who were less intrinsically motivated, and making a face-to-face connection with them may have made my requests more difficult to ignore. Additionally, I was limited to contacting English-speaking bloggers and while I made an effort to recruit bloggers representing diverse identities and viewpoints, most of the bloggers I spoke with were young, white, middle class, cisgender, straight, "straight-sized" (as opposed to plus sized), and operated small- to mid-size blogs.

The observations I conducted at the Independent Fashion Bloggers conference in New York (both as a home viewer watching a livestream from my computer, and as an attendee were invaluable to this project, giving me a greater sense of the cultural meanings surrounding personal style blogging. However, this is just one of several conferences aimed toward fashion bloggers. Given more time and resources, I would have liked to have attended more of these conferences, including the Texas Style Council, which targets less professionally-oriented bloggers, the Lucky Fabb conference hosted by *Lucky* magazine, and the Style Bloggers of Color conference. However, the observations I made at IFB regarding the significance of branding and authenticity were echoed throughout my interactions with bloggers, which makes me confident that the IFB conference was representative of other blogging conferences.

Lastly, while I grounded my observations about men's style bloggers on a relatively small sample, their responses are in line with recent theoretical

reconceptualizations of masculinities (Bridges 2010; Bridges 2014; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001; Ward 2007), and suggest an orientation toward consumption and the body which is not accounted for in existing research on "consumer masculinities" (Alexander 2003; Bordo 1999; Edwards 1997; Frith and Gleeson 2004; Galilee 2002; Gill at al. 2005; Harrison 2008; Nixon 1996; Norman 2011; Ricciardelli et al. 2010; Tuncay and Otnes 2008b).

Suggestions for Further Research

In this research, I wanted to explore what drives people to present themselves to an unknown audience on social media, the implications for the self, and the way these processes are gendered. I made a point to recruit bloggers from diverse backgrounds in order to gain a broader picture of bloggers' experiences. However, my research suggested that there are some distinctions between bloggers which would be fruitful to explore. In particular, plus size bloggers describe their relationship to blogging and fashion in different ways than straight size bloggers. They described an ambivalence toward the fashion industry, and a greater concern regarding "selling out." Further research on self-documentation should examine its use as a political strategy. As Taylor (1994) notes, despite modern concepts of universal human rights, some groups have been historically denied visibility, recognition, and dignity. In this context, access to tools of cultural production and dissemination can be a means of achieving visibility in the face of institutional resistance.

Late in the process of conducting my research, I came across the anti-fan site Get Off My Internets. I included the GOMI blog as a part of my content analysis, but further

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research may wish to examine the site more in-depth, in particular, focusing on the forums, where users convene to pick apart the photos, writing, and lives of lifestyle bloggers. Most research on anti-fandoms is centered on large-scale media properties. By focusing their attention on microcelebrities like personal style bloggers, GOMI construct meaning regarding who is worthy of visibility and why. Further research is needed to examine how anti-fans construct these meanings, and how audiences respond to individuals' self-brands and performances of microcelebrity.

Lastly, in this project, discuss male bloggers' performance of gender as a type of hybrid masculinity which proliferates in an entrepreneurial, consumer culture. Previous research has examined the rising significance of aesthetic consumption as a way of performing masculinity, but these analyses highlighted a tension between this sort of consumption and the enactment of hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, among the bloggers I studied, straight male bloggers incorporated consumer body projects associated with femininity and gay men into the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Future research should explore this further, examining, for instance, men and boys' use of self-portraiture and lifestyle documentation on social media. Additionally, future research might focus on the political implications of consumer masculinities enacted by men whose masculinities have been subordinated, such as non-white men, transmen and transmasculine individuals, or fat men.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Profession	Education
Elizabeth	18	White	Female	--	Student	Some college
Lisa	31	Black	Female	Straight	Therapist	College graduate
Jessica	27	Hispanic	Female	Bisexual	Teacher and graduate student	Graduate school
Charlene	27	White	Female	Straight	Bartender, student, freelancer	Some college
Kat	24	White	Female	Straight	Graduate student	Graduate school
Tom	25	White	Male	Straight	Graduate student	Graduate school
Ryan	25	White	Male	Gay	Retail	College
Sarah	34	White	Female	Straight	Stylist and vintage seller	--
Vince	21	Hispanic	Male	Gay	Retail	High school
Daphne	28	Hispanic	Female	--	Student	Some college

Remy	25	Filipino	Male	Straight	Retail and freelance stylist	High school
Alexandria	30	White	Female	Straight	Visual merchandising	--
Anthony	25	Asian	Male	Gay	Social media manager	College
Carrie	27	White	Female	Straight	Office work	--
Becky	29	White	Female	Bisexual	Creative director and graphic designer	Some college
Danielle	35	Black	Female	Straight	Author and fashion instructor	College
Greta	28	White	Female	Straight	Helps with husband's business	--
Florian	21	White	Male	Straight	Fashion student	Some college
Sigmund	27	Filipino	Male	--	Public relations and professional blogger	College
Paris	33	Asian and Native American	Female	Straight	Stay-at-home mom	College
Marcus	24	Black	Male	Straight	Blogger and student	Some college

Faith	32	Black and white	Female	Straight	Professional blogger	Graduate school
Nick	22	Asian and Black	Male	Gay	Works in restaurant and online store	College
Joan	36	White	Female	Straight	Professional blogger	College
Charmalade	21	Asian	Female	Straight	Student	Some college
Charlotte	25	White	Female	Straight	Freelance web designer and vintage seller	College
Dorothy	26	White	Female	Straight	Writer and vocational trainer	College
Jane	25	White	Female	Straight	Student and server	Some college
Kelly	25	White	Female	Straight	Freelancer and communications specialist	College
Marie	25	White	Female	Straight	Graduate student	Some graduate school

APPENDIX B: BLOGS IN CONTENT ANALYSIS (LAST ACCESSED JANUARY 3, 2015)

Blog Title	URL
AVANT BLARGH	http://avantblargh.blogspot.com/
Calivintage	http://www.calivintage.com/
Cupcakes and Cashmere	http://cupcakesandcashmere.com/
Dandy Project	http://www.thedandyproject.com/
Fancy Fine	http://www.ashleyording.com/
Fashion Goggled	http://www.fashiongoggled.com/
Fashion Pirate	http://www.fashionpirate.net/
For Show	http://www.kzspygv.com/
Gabi Fresh	http://gabifresh.com/
Get Off My Internets	http://getoffmyinternets.net/
I AM GALLA	http://iamgalla.com/
Independent Fashion Bloggers	http://heartifb.com/
Karla's Closet	http://karlascloset.com/
Katelovesme	http://www.katelovesme.net/
Keiko Lynn	http://www.keikolynn.com/

Kolonel Mustard	http://kolonelmustard.com/
Latter Style	http://www.latterstyle.com/
The Metro Man	http://www.themetro-man.com/
Nadia Aboulhosn	http://www.nadiaaboulhosn.com/
Nicolette Mason	http://www.nicolettemason.com/
Pin Stripe Prince	http://pinstripeprince.blogspot.com/
Scout Sixteen	http://scoutsixteen.com/
Stay Classic	http://stayclassicblog.com/
Style is Style	http://www.styleisstyle.com/
The Hobbyists	http://sudarsobros.blogspot.com/
What I Wore	http://whatiwore.tumblr.com/

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 Linkedin." *Media, Culture, and Society* 35(2): 199-215.

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CURRICULUM VITA

Jennifer M. Whitmer	University of Nevada, Las Vegas Department of Sociology 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, Box 455033 Las Vegas, NV 89154-5033	Cell: (440) 429-5957 Office: (702) 895-5467 whitmerj@unlv.nevada.edu

Appointments

2015-present	**Visiting Assistant Professor**, St. Ambrose University Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice

Areas of Specialization

Gender and Sexuality	Stratification	Theory	Culture
Social Psychology	Communication and Information Technologies		Qualitative Methods

Education

2015 (expected)	Ph.D., Sociology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Las Vegas, NV <u>Dissertation</u>: What I Wore Today: Gender, Self, and Brand Culture in the Blogosphere <u>Committee</u>: Simon Gottschalk (chair), Michael Borer, Barb Brents, David Dickens <u>Comprehensive Exam Areas</u>: Gender; Culture
2013	Graduate certificate, Women's Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Las Vegas, NV <u>Capstone</u>: "The Only Thing Making Sense Right Now is Tucked-in Femininity": Personal Style Blogs and Gendered Identity Online
2009	M.A., Sociology, Cleveland State University; Cleveland, OH

Thesis: The Role of Utopian Fiction in Sociology: The Case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman

2008   B.A., Sociology and Psychology (summa cum laude), Cleveland State University; Cleveland, OH

2005   Associate of Liberal Arts, Cuyahoga Community College; Parma, OH

Journal Articles and Chapters

Spivak, Andrew, Brooke Wagner, **Jennifer Whitmer**, and Courtney Charish. 2014. "Gender and Status Offending: Judicial Paternalism in Juvenile Justice Processing." *Feminist Criminology* 9(3): 224-248.

Gottschalk, Simon and **Jennifer Whitmer**. 2013. "Hypermodern Dramaturgy in Online Encounters." *The Drama of Social Life: A Dramaturgical Handbook* edited by Charles Edgley. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.

Encyclopedia Articles

Whitmer, Jennifer. 2015. "Beauty Industry." *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies* edited by Daniel Cook and J. Michael Ryan.

Whitmer, Jennifer and Simon Gottschalk. 2014. "Dooced."*Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics*, edited by Kerric Harvey.

Research Reports

Wagner, Brooke, **Jennifer Whitmer**, and Andrew Spivak. 2015. "The Commerical Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in the United States: A National Study of CSEC Prevalence, Prosecution, and Services (Report on Las Vegas, NV)."

Manuscripts under Review

Whitmer, Jennifer. "Blogging the Branded Self: Self-Branding, Authenticity, and Impression Management." Under review at *Symbolic Interaction*.

Manuscripts in Progress

Whitmer, Jennifer. "Between 'A Regular Person and a Celebrity': Microcelebrity and the Balance between Authenticity and 'Blog-Worthiness.'" (To be submitted Fall 2015)

Whitmer, Jennifer. "'A Progression and a Regression at the Same Time': Hybrid Masculinities and Entrepreurial Selfhood." (To be submitted Summer 2015)

Whitmer, Jennifer, Brittney Ballesteros, and Barb Brents. "Reporting Sex Work in Sin City: Depictions of Prostitution in the Las Vegas News Media." (To be submitted Fall 2015)

Honors and Awards

2015   First Place for UNLV Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award

          Honorable mention Outstanding Presentation Award at UNLV Graduate and

Professional Student Research Forum for "Producing Authenticity: Personal Style Bloggers, Self Branding, and Cultural Intermediaries."

2014   Honorable Mention for the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction's Herbert Blumer Graduate Student Paper Award for "Producing Authenticity: Self-Branding and the Production of Symbolic Value."

Outstanding Student Paper Award, UNLV Department of Sociology for "Producing Authenticity: Self-Branding and the Production of Symbolic Value."

UNLV Liberal Arts Ph.D. Student Summer Faculty Research Award

SAGE/Pine Forge Teaching Innovations and Professional Development Award

UNLV Summer Session Scholarship

2013   UNLV Summer Session Scholarship

Outstanding PhD Student Award, UNLV Department of Sociology

Outstanding Student Paper Award, UNLV Department of Sociology for "'Straight Talk'? Men's Style Blogs and the Negotiation of Consumer Masculinities."

First place Outstanding Presentation Award at UNLV Graduate and Professional Student Research Forum for "Blogging the Branded Self: Goffman in Hypermodernity"

2010   Recipient of competitive Sexual Economy Project Assistantship at University of Nevada, Las Vegas

2010-   UNLV Graduate and Professional Student Association travel grants (Fall 2010,
2015   Spring 2010, Spring 2012, Spring 2013, Spring 2013, Summer 2014, Spring 2015)

2008   Recipient of competitive Mareyjoyce Green Assistantship at Cleveland State University

Teaching Experience

Instructor

Fall 2015   SOC 421 Classical Social Theory (40 student enrollment limit)
            SOC 101 Principles of Sociology (60 student enrollment limit)

Fall 2014   SOC 421 Classical Social Theory (40 student enrollment limit)
            SOC 453 Gender and Society (40 student enrollment limit)

Spring 2014 SOC 445 Men in Society (40 student enrollment limit)

Fall 2013   SOC 101 Principles of Sociology (60 student enrollment limit)

Spring 2013   SOC 101 Principles of Sociology (60 student enrollment limit)
                SOC 421 Classical Social Theory (40 student enrollment limit)

Fall 2012   SOC 101 Principles of Sociology (60 student enrollment limit)
                SOC 421 Classical Social Theory (40 student enrollment limit)

Graduate Teaching Assistant
Fall 2009-Spring   SOC 403 Techniques of Social Research
2010

Presentations

Campus Presentations
2015   Whitmer, Jennifer. "Syllabus and Assignment Creation." Graduate and
        Professional Student Association Panel. Las Vegas, NV. February 2015.

2014   Spivak, Andrew, **Jennifer Whitmer**, and Rachel McFarlane. "CSEC Report." Phi
        Alpha Delta Human Trafficking Symposium. Las Vegas, NV. April 2014.

2013   Whitmer, Jennifer. "'Straight Talk'? Men's Style Blogs and the Negotiation of
        Masculinity." Presented as part of the Gender and Sexualities Brown Bag Lecture
        Series sponsored by UNLV Women's Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies. March
        2013.

Professional Meetings
2015   **Whitmer, Jennifer**, Brittney Ballesteros, and Barb Brents. "Reporting Sex Work
        in Sin City: Depictions of Prostitution in the Las Vegas News Media." Presented
        at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. Long Beach, CA.
        April 2015.

2014   Spivak, Andrew, Brooke Wagner, and **Jennifer Whitmer**. "Juvenile and Young
        Adult Prostitutes: Reconsidering the Trafficking Narrative." Presented at the
        Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology. San Francisco, CA.
        November, 2014.

        Whitmer, Jennifer. "Producing Authenticity: Personal Style Bloggers, Branding,
        and Cultural Intermediaries." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American
        Sociological Association. San Francisco, CA. August 2014.

2013   Whitmer, Jennifer. "Cultural Production of the Authentic Self-Brand on Personal
        Style Blogs." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of
        Symbolic Interaction. New York, NY. August 2013.

        Whitmer, Jennifer. "'Straight Talk'? Men's Style Blogs and the Negotiation of

Consumer Masculinities." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. Reno, NV. March 2013.

2012   Whitmer, Jennifer. "Blogging the Branded Self: Goffman in Hypermodernity." Presented at the Couch-Stone Symposium. Chicago, IL. April 2012.

2011   Whitmer, Jennifer. "Traps, Lolitas, and Yaoi Fangirls: Gender Hegemony in the US Anime Fan Community." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. Las Vegas, NV. August 2011.

        Whitmer, Jennifer. "What I Wore Today: Personal Style Blogging and Gendered Identity." Presented at the Couch-Stone Symposium. Las Vegas, NV. March 2011.

2010   Spivak, Andrew, Brooke Wagner, **Jennifer Whitmer**, and Courtney Charish. "Gender and Status Offending: Judicial Paternalism in Juvenile Justice Processing." Presented with Brooke Wagner at the Annual Meeting of the American Criminological Society." San Francisco, CA. November 2010.

        Whitmer, Jennifer. "Sociology through Literature: **Charlotte Perkins Gilman** and the Role of Utopian Fiction in Sociology." Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. Oakland, CA. March 2010.

Research Experience

Research Assistant, Experience Life is Beautiful Project, Dr. Michael Borer (October 2014-present)
>   Conducted ethnographic research on the Life is Beautiful music festival in downtown Las Vegas

Research Fellow, UNLV College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Dr. Simon Gottschalk (May 2014-August 2014)
>   Compiled literature for an interdisciplinary study of digital miscommunication within interdisciplinary research teams and for a book project about hypermodern theory

Research Coordinator, Center for Court Innovation's Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Project (February 2011-August 2014)
>   Collected quantitative and qualitative data on the size, characteristics, and needs of the CSEC population in Las Vegas including interviewing, field work, and respondent driven sampling.

Research Assistant, Sexual Economy Project, UNLV, Dr. Barb Brents and Dr. Andrew Spivak. (August 2010-May 2012)
>   Compiled literature and developed survey and research protocol for collecting descriptive quantitative data on the consumption of sexualized adult entertainment in Nevada's legal brothels

Research Assistant, Department of Sociology, UNLV, Dr. Andrew Spivak (August 2009-

May 2010)

> Assisted with research examining gender effects on justice decision points within the juvenile system for status offenders as well as research testing theories of rape using NCVS data. Compiled literature and edited work.

Research Assistant, Department of Sociology, Cleveland State University, Drs. Dana Hubbard and Wendy Regoeczi (August 2008-August 2009)

> Collected data and performed data entry for research evaluating the effect of a domestic violence advocacy program on prosecutions.

Professional Service

2015-2018	Appointed member on the Pacific Sociological Association's Committee of Freedom of Research and Teaching
2014-2015	Undergraduate Studies Graduate Student Representative, Department of Sociology, UNLV
2014	Ad Hoc Reviewer, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*
	Presider, Consumers and Consumption roundtable. Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. San Francisco, CA.
	Presider, "Sex and Love in Traditional and Social Media." Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. Portland, OR.
2013	Hiring Committee Graduate Student Representative, Department of Sociology, UNLV
	Presider, "Methodological Challenges in Gender Research." Annual Meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association. Reno, NV.
2012-2013	Graduate Student Representative, Department of Sociology, UNLV
	Personnel Committee Graduate Student Representative, Department of Sociology, UNLV

Public Engagement

"How Serious is Human Trafficking?" January 29, 2014. Nevada's Public Radio, KNPR's State of Nevada.
"A Culture Reshaped." 2012. *Vegas Seven*. November 22.
http://vegasseven.com/2012/11/22/culture-reshaped/

Professional Affiliations and Memberships

American Sociological Association	Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction
Pacific Sociological Association	Alpha Kappa Delta
Sociologists for Women in Society	

Additional Trainings and Workshops

2014   Civility in the Classroom: ASA Teaching and Learning Pre-Conference Workshop. San Francisco, CA. August 2014.

2012   Special Workshop: Constructing Interpretive Theory Through Grounded Theory, Dr. Kathy Charmaz, Annual Meeting of the Society of Symbolic Interaction, Denver, CO. August 2012.