

Fashion Blogging: A Metamodern Practice

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Abstract

The field of fashion has expanded to include a new entrant – the superstar fashion blogger. Indeed, a select few fashion bloggers have successfully built personal brands that appeal to a wide international audience, presenting fashion designers with a new frontier for marketing fashion products. As a result, bloggers are now allocated coveted front row seats at fashion shows, while magazine editors have been relegated to less desirable seats, indicating a disruption in the traditional fashion media hierarchies. Using the examples of Bryanboy and Tavi Gevinson, this paper discusses the emergent modes of expression that fashion bloggers utilise in engaging their audiences. In particular, the strategies of Performativity and New Sincerity, which may be expressed through the fashion blogger's habitus, appear to provide insights into the way audiences are effectively engaged on digital platforms. This paper further posits that the oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities inherent in Performativity and New Sincerity may be encapsulated by the cultural logic of metamodernism.

Keywords: New Media, fashion blogging, metamodernism, audience engagement

Introduction

The introduction of the superstar fashion blogger into the fashion industry has changed the dynamics of fashion communication drastically (Rocamora, 2012). Where fashion editors and journalists used to be the key players in the legitimization of fashion trends, fashion bloggers are quickly staking their claim in the fashion arena as evidenced by their domination of the front-row seats at major fashion shows all over the world (Corcoran, 2006; Wilson, 2009). Their admission into the social institution of fashion proves to be an interesting case study in the evolution of communication as it shows how the advent of digital communication has provided amateur content creators with the opportunity to overcome traditional media hierarchies and establish their blogs as legitimate sources of information. The fact that fashion blogger Bryanboy's website can attract up to 215,000 unique visitors a day as opposed to the 200,000 copies of *Vogue* sold each month is quickly making fashion bloggers indispensable to the marketing strategies of fashion designers (Copping, 2009). However, while anybody with access to the Internet can start a blog, not all fashion bloggers successfully assimilate into the notoriously exclusive world of fashion.

Pederson (2011) suggested that the practice of fashion blogging was a form of metamodernist expression that resulted in a trickle-up flow of fashion aesthetics. A review of the literature has yielded two distinct strategies through which metamodernism may be identified. First, the notion of Performativity is based on the premise of achieving self-actualisation through performance (Viramontes, 2008), and

blogging has been identified as a performative platform (Pederson, 2011; Hawkins, 2011). However, Performativity is not static, it contains an oscillating tension between authenticity and artifice (Albrecht, 2008) which in the context of blogging can refer to the balance between self-expression and self-promotion. Second, it may be argued that the tone of expression in some successful blogs reflect the sensibility of New Sincerity, where the simultaneous expression of sincerity and irony allows the author to connect with the audience on an intellectual and personal level. Thus, the success of elite bloggers in engaging a wide audience has made them economically attractive as marketing channels for fashion designers, cementing their position in the field of fashion (Copping, 2009).

Enveloping the metamodern concepts of Performativity and New Sincerity is Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the habitus, which will be employed in the examination of the individual's practices in relation to the wider social structures of the field. Specifically, the examples of Bryanboy and Tavi Gevinson will be used to illustrate the proposition that Performativity and New Sincerity are integral to the habitus of successful fashion bloggers, and how this has allowed them to stake their claim amongst other established figures in fashion journalism. This in turn raises new considerations for ways in which both fashion consumers and producers may be engaged online.

Literature Review

The field of fashion is especially important in the sociological tradition because it can be viewed as a microcosm of social hierarchies the characteristics of which may be extrapolated to represent other cultural industries (Bourdieu, 1993; Kawamura, 2005). According to Bourdieu (1983), a cultural field reflects the social hierarchies constituting the relational positions that agents can occupy depending on the type and amount of capital they possess. Essentially, the field is comprised of established figures that employ conservation strategies in order to maintain the status quo, whereas new entrants employ subversive strategies to disrupt and transform the structures in the field so that they in turn move into positions of dominance. In an ethnographic study of London Fashion Week, Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) examined the relational positions of agents in the field of fashion. Designers, models, journalists, buyers, stylists and celebrities were identified as key agents, with less important figures like fashion students existing on the periphery of the field. Indeed, prior to the phenomenon of niche fashion blogging, fashion magazine writers and editors were the formal authorities of the fashion industry (Kawamura, 2005). Since Entwistle and Rocamora's (2006) ethnographic study, the field has seen a new entrant in the form of the superstar fashion blogger rise to a position of dominance. However, while fashion blogging is an individual practice, bloggers require legitimation from agents within the field of fashion, such as designers or publicists, in order to assimilate successfully. This is because agents within a field are the custodians of its limits, and newcomers may only gain access through acknowledgment from existing agents in the field (Bourdieu, 1986).

Fashion bloggers often begin as enthusiastic consumers that engage in digital branded storytelling, where the featured brands or products take centre stage in the narrative of the blog post (Kretz and De Valck, 2010). Thus, bloggers may be explicitly or implicitly associated with certain brands, resulting in the formation of an identity, which may be commoditised (Chittenden, 2010). Further, it may be argued that the way in which a blogger chooses to embody or express their appreciation for fashion stems from their habitus (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2011). According to Bourdieu, the habitus can be regarded as internal structures that have been ingrained since early childhood, influencing the subjective inclinations of the individual (Bourdieu, 1977). The key contributors to the formation of the habitus include family and educational background, which shape the development of tastes and dispositions that govern attitudes and behaviour (Bourdieu, 1984). The habitus is said to be durable in that it stays with the individual throughout his or her lifetime, and transposable in that it may be expressed across various social fields (Bourdieu, 1977). Parallel to the rise of fashion bloggers is an emergent structure of feeling called metamodernism that appears to be representative of the modes of expression that occur online (Pederson, 2011). Thus, this paper argues that these metamodern modes of expression manifest through the habitus of superstar fashion bloggers.

Metamodernism can be defined as an emergent cultural sensibility that demonstrates a constant and dynamic oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities; between the sincerity, unity and purity of modernism, and the irony, plurality and promiscuity of postmodernism (Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2010). It is important to note that this oscillation is not merely a balance, but a constant and

dynamic shifting, much like a pendulum swinging between innumerable states of being. Thus, Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010) situate metamodernism historically *beyond*, epistemologically *with*, and ontologically *between* the modern and the postmodern. The existing literature points to the concepts of Performativity (Pederson, 2011) and New Sincerity (MacDowell, 2011) as strategies of metamodernism.

Performativity

According to Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010), metamodernism is articulated through the sensibility of New Romanticism, which is an updated revival of the Romantic Movement. Essentially, the Romantic Movement was defined by idealism through the expression of pure and unadulterated emotion, and was characterised by the extremes of utopianism and dystopianism (Pinch, 1997). However, instead of a descension into nihilism inherent in the Romantic logic (Clemens, 2003), the dystopian sensibility in New Romanticism refers to the realisation of the impossibility of an idealistic pursuit due to the constraints of daily life, making it a *new* conception rooted in Romanticism (Vermeulen & Van den Akker, 2010). Thus, New Romanticism strives towards self-actualisation through the elevation of the commonplace and mundaneness of everyday life into the realm of the sublime, the ethereal and the uncanny. This transcendence of everyday life is said to manifest through Performativity (Anderson, 2006; Viramontes, 2008). Performativity has been defined

as the presentation of the individual subject through performance that leads to self-actualisation (Strain, 2009). The notion of performativity appears to be inherently metamodern as it involves a constant tension between authenticity and artifice (Albrecht, 2008); and correspondingly, between modern authenticity and postmodern hyperreality.

In the context of digital communication, Lenhart (2005) found that the practice of blogging entailed a constant negotiation between the blogger's aim of authentic self-expression and contrived self-promotion. Indeed, the practice of blogging involved the articulation of personal thoughts in what Pederson (2011) called 'performative narrations', allowing bloggers to establish an identity that is representative of who they are as individuals. As Jetto (2010) found, bloggers of the Australian music industry wielded a legitimacy based on editorial autonomy, leading to the impression of authenticity. Rocamora (2012) found that information sharing through blogs facilitated the perception of authenticity as the immediacy of presenting mediated material gave the audience the illusion of watching a 'live' performance. On the other hand, one of the key criticisms of blogging is the deliberate exaggeration of a persona simulated by the blogger through the content they create (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Hawkins, 2011). Similar to the commodification of magazines, advertisers have leveraged on the blogger's personal brand to reach a targeted audience (Cassidy & Fitch, 2012). Therefore, this study views performativity as the representation of the subject through a performance that is underpinned by the constant tensions between modern authenticity and postmodern hyperreality. This dialectic of authenticity and artifice will be used as a point of discussion, to find

out if fashion blogging can be categorised as a metamodern practice. Specifically, the example of Bryanboy will be used to illustrate the notion of a Performative habitus later in the paper.

New Sincerity

Building on the work of Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010), recent discourse in film has also identified the notion of New Sincerity as an expression of metamodernism (MacDowell, 2011). Buckland (2012) described New Sincerity as a sensibility that encompassed a constant oscillation between sincerity and irony. Trilling (1972, p. 2) defined sincerity as “a congruence between avowal and feeling”. Essentially, sincerity involves the representation of oneself truly to others without falsification or subterfuge, not as an end, but rather as a means of expression (Erikson, 1995). Such expression reflects an alignment of internal and external states of being (Targoff, 1997), which Melzer (2010) identified as a fundamental human virtue. According to Hawkins (2011) sincerity can be found in digital communication practices as the confessional nature of blogging could be linked to Foucault’s (1989) hermeneutics of the self, where bloggers engage in a discourse of identity with both themselves and their audience.

At the other end of the spectrum, the concept of irony has historically been used to denote an incongruity between literal and intended meanings (Sperber & Wilson, 1981). Indeed, the postmodern tradition of irony suggests a text may have multiple meanings at both the literal and implied levels (Shugart, 1999). Hutcheon (1992, p.

219) defined irony as a “semantic balancing, as a fence-sitting, bet-hedging middle ground where evasion and complicity sit – not totally comfortable with – commitment and critique”. Thus, postmodern irony is often characterised by subversion, detachment, and scepticism (Hutcheon, 1992). In the context of digital communication, the use of figurative language in the form of irony and sarcasm is pervasive in social media interactions (Yu, 2007; Reyes, Rosso & Buscaldi, 2012). The presence of irony within a text requires an audience that is adept at bridging the disparity between meanings to identify the intended meaning. This way, irony may be used as a rhetorical tool to engage specific audiences in what Booth (1983, p. 729) called an “identification of two minds” between the ironist and the interpreter. In recent journalism studies, a blurring of the lines between news and entertainment through the use of subjectivity, humour and irony as a means of engaging younger audiences has been noted (Deuze, 2005; Feldman, 2007).

This dialectic of sincerity and irony has been found to simultaneously manifest in art (Saltz, 2010) and film (Rombes, 2005). Commenting on emergent sensibilities in film, Buckland (2012) proffered that New Sincerity is not a regression back into idyllic modernist thought, but rather involves an incorporation of postmodern irony and cynicism with a modern purity and naiveté. The oscillating tension between sincerity and irony within a single sensibility results in a tonal quality that MacDowell (2011, p. 1) described as ‘quirky’. Indeed, the term ‘quirky’ has been used to describe the blogs of Tavi Gevinson (Square, 2012) and Susie Lau (Jacobs, 2012), both of whom have demonstrated an ability to enthrall an audience through the content they produce. Rombes (2005, p. 74) surmised that it is possible to both “evoke a sincere

emotional response while at the same time ... create the possibilities for the audience to see through the very mechanisms that elicit response". Chan (2011) associated the complexity of emotions expressed in New Sincerity with the potential for engagement on a phenomenological level. Therefore, through the cultural lens of metamodernism, New Sincerity will also be used as a point of discussion for this paper.

Methodology

This paper is a preliminary examination of the existing literature on metamodernism and the theoretical concepts pertinent to fashion blogging for a larger scale research project. The objective of the study is to provide a greater understanding of the relationship between fashion bloggers and more traditional media, such as fashion magazines, and their impact on the social hierarchy of the fashion world. As such, the discussion in this paper was derived from a qualitative analysis of two bloggers who present interesting case studies on their success in engaging both fashion consumers and producers through digital platforms. Specifically, the blogs of Bryan Grey Yambao, better known as Bryanboy, and Tavi Gevinson were analysed in relation to the metamodern concepts of Performativity and New Sincerity based on known details of the bloggers' career trajectory, blog content and existing press interviews. These blogs were sampled purposively with the aim of deriving

contextual data that may illustrate the complexities of fashion communication, through the use of a Bourdieusian framework.

Case Studies

The rise of Bryanboy, a fashion blogger from the Philippines, is well-documented by the mainstream fashion press, presenting an interesting example of how a fashion blogger can not only become a legitimate intermediary, but also a dominant figure in the industry. Although Bryanboy started his blog in 2004, he only attracted the attention of the fashion industry in 2007, when he posted a video of himself raving about a bag designed by Marc Jacobs. The designer subsequently responded with a picture of himself carrying a sign that read: 'I Love Bryanboy', and also named the bag in question *BB* after Bryanboy's initials (Sauers, 2012). Following this, Bryanboy was invited by Dolce & Gabbana to a Milan Fashion Show and was seated in the front row alongside high-profile magazine editors, causing a furore in the fashion industry. This mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) presupposition that new entrants need to be invited into the field by existing agents. More importantly, the fact that Bryanboy had a high readership that could be tapped into for economic conversions meant that he would eventually be regarded as a key player in a field driven by consumption. In an interview with online magazine *Swide* (2010), Bryanboy cited the combination of economic struggle by designers and the possibility of the Internet being a new frontier for engagement as the main reasons for designers embracing bloggers for digital marketing. This is especially apparent in Dolce & Gabbana's decision to seat bloggers in the front rows of their fashion shows, relegating

magazine editors to less desirable seats. In 2012 Bryanboy became a judge on the hit television show *America's Next Top Model*, where he replaced industry veterans on the judging panel (Krupnick, 2012). Thus, the practice of blogging has shown to yield powerful results in the field of fashion, raising new concerns pertaining to how audiences may be engaged online.

Indeed, blogging can be described as a practice based on performative narrations that encapsulate the tension between authenticity and artifice, or between self-expression and self-promotion. Bryanboy appears to be a prime example for performativity as each blog post often includes numerous images of him modelling outfits in varying poses. The accompanying text is written in the first person and includes a description and personal anecdotes of recent happenings. The narrative of each blog post also carries over onto other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, where Bryanboy often reveals more details about his daily life, which sometimes includes images taken from his seat at a fashion show. Essentially, Bryanboy's blog and social media appears to form a heavily documented editorial of his life and identity, and it is his willingness to put his life on display that has garnered him a large following. This is supported by Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005), who found that bloggers who shared intimate details of their lives tended to attract a higher readership than bloggers who favoured privacy. As Hawkins (2011) noted, the act of blogging is inherently a performance as it involves the presentation of the individual to an audience, albeit on a digital platform. However, as with any performance, there is a possibility for the presentation of a persona that may be exaggerated or distorted, especially if doing so could lead to economic gain. This

calls into question the authenticity of blog posts because there is no way for the reader to discern if a blog post is based on genuine opinion or sponsored advertorial. Bryanboy's blog, for instance, features heavy advertising, and an analysis of the textual content on his blog indicates a tendency to only portray the fashion designers mentioned in a positive light. It should be noted that Bryanboy practises disclosure in terms of items gifted to him or sponsored travel, and also indicates if a blog post is sponsored. Despite the monetisation of his blog, Bryanboy still sustains a high following on it and other social media platforms. Thus, the ability to negotiate between the poles of authenticity and artifice in the performative practice of blogging can result in successful engagement with both fashion consumers and fashion producers. Further, the fact that Bryanboy has since transcended the blogosphere to penetrate the field of television with a position as a judge on *America's Next Top Model* indicates that the performative habitus can be adapted across fields, which reflects Bourdieu's (1997) notion of the transposable habitus.

While the expression of a performative habitus may have contributed to Bryanboy's rise to dominance in the fashion industry, this is not the only mode of engagement that has emerged out of the metamodern paradigm. Fashion blogger Tavi Gevinson, in particular, has established herself through her own brand of quirky style and honest musings on the fashion industry. Tavi Gevinson is an American blogger who started her blog *The Style Rookie* at the age of 11, which featured home-styled photo-shoots featuring her and her friends. The images on Gevinson's blog evoke a sense of nostalgia and sometimes include handwritten notes scanned from the pages of her diary. This reflects Chittenden's (2010) proposition that the fashion

blogosphere has become a discursive space for teenage girls in the formation of identity. Gevinson's confident journalistic voice and strong opinions on fashion caught the attention of the designers she often blogged about, which led to invitations to front row seats at fashion shows at the age of 13. Gevinson's inclination to present blog posts containing collaged images of themes that interest and inspire her reflects the practice of blogging as digital bricolage proposed by Deuze (2006).

Like Bryanboy, Gevinson also addresses her readers in the first person, although her posts are longer and appear to reveal more depth through frequent reflections on the cultural impact of the fashion industry on teenage girls' body image. Her willingness to reveal her innermost thoughts even though they might be critical of the fashion industry indicates the presence of sincerity. A self-professed feminist, Gevinson displays an awareness of the unrealistic beauty standards and champions greater diversification in what should be accepted as beautiful in the fashion industry. This is often presented through ironic statements such as:

It's supposed to be this place with the most beautiful people in the world, and I was this incredibly tiny, gray-haired—what's the word?—gnome. That was the time in my life when I was most photographed, and I'm not embarrassed by that; I think it's hilarious that in the middle of these rooms full of tall, skinny people in black was this tiny weird person (Gevinson in Oatman-Stanford, 2012).

Her eloquent and sometimes wry critique of the fashion industry initially led to scepticism of her identity because of her age. However, it should be noted that Gevinson's father is a retired English teacher and her mother is a renowned tapestry

weaver (Schulman, 2012), which could account for Gevinson's ability to expound on aesthetics and culture articulately. This is in line with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the habitus, which credits family and educational background as key contributors to the formation of the individual's dispositions and attitudes that govern behaviour. Gevinson's ability to express sincere sentiments through the rhetorical device of irony demonstrates her embodiment of the New Sincerity sensibility that manifests through her habitus. This results in her signature quirky quality that has appealed to both fashion producers and consumers, and this is supported by Smith (2011), who found that quirky expression allowed bloggers to connect with their readers on a more personal level. In 2011, Gevinson made the decision to shift her focus from fashion blogging to the creation of *Rookie*, a feminist online magazine for teenage girls, which earned her the title of 'the oracle of girl world' (Schulman, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper specifically examined the phenomenon of the superstar fashion blogger and how a select few individuals have capitalised on the communicative opportunities afforded by the Internet to become dominant figures in the fashion industry. It has demonstrated that the success of elite fashion bloggers go beyond mere access to technology. Instead, these bloggers utilise complex modes of engagement in the form of Performativity and New Sincerity that are inherently metamodern. Both Performativity and New Sincerity may be regarded as a product of the individual's habitus. However, it is also important to note that both Bryanboy and Tavi Gevinson went through a process of legitimation as their entry into the field

was facilitated by recognition from fashion designers in the form of invitations to fashion shows. Essentially, it was the ability of elite bloggers to appeal to fashion consumers that made them economically attractive to fashion producers.

Bloggers like Bryanboy demonstrate a performative habitus through a willingness to share details of themselves through a combination of text, images and videos, engaging readers in a narrative of the blogger's daily life. Often this feeds into other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. However, Performativity entails an oscillating tension between authenticity and artifice that needs to be negotiated in order for the fashion blogger to appear as a legitimate authority on style to fashion consumers, while leaving room for opportunities with fashion producers that may lead to economic capital. Similarly, bloggers like Tavi Gevinson illustrate the metamodern strategy of New Sincerity through their willingness to present honest opinions, even if this includes being critical of the fashion industry. This sincerity is often expressed using the rhetorical device of irony, resulting in a unique quirky quality that is appealing and engaging on a personal level. Thus, the metamodern strategies of Performativity and New Sincerity raise new considerations on how fashion consumers and fashion producers may be effectively engaged in the digital age.

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