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The Megaphone Effect in Social Media: How Ordinary Consumers Become Style Leaders

Edward F. McQuarrie and Barbara J. Phillips

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Blog, Consumption, Consumer Culture, Social Brand Engagement, Fashion, Cultural Capital

THE AUTHORS

Edward F. McQuarrie,
Professor of Marketing,
Santa Clara University, USA,
emcquarrie@scu.edu

Barbara J. Phillips,
Rawlco Scholar in Advertising,
Professor of Marketing,
University of Saskatchewan,
Canada,
bphillips@edwards.usask.ca

Using the Web as a megaphone /// The world of fashion is glamorous and attractive to consumers around the world. Many people dream of being a part of this world dominated by the beautiful and the rich. Thanks to the Web, some ordinary consumers successfully enter this privileged scene simply by writing about fashion online. Even a 13-year-old girl was able to "grab hold of the megaphone" and reach thousands of other consumers despite having neither an institutional position nor a family background in the fashion business. This blogger took hold of the megaphone by her own actions. Starting out as an ordinary consumer, she publicly selected, evaluated and presented clothing and posted accounts of this consumption to a growing audience of strangers. Her success brought her fame, opening the door to exclusive fashion events, free designer pieces and other perks.

Gaining social position by the public consumption of fashion /// The idea of taste as cultural capital can explain why some bloggers enjoy such success. The theory of cultural capital was developed by the French sociologist Bourdieu in the 1960s. It is built around distinctions in what is considered tasteful and what is not. Being able to exercise good taste was, in Bourdieu's early thinking, a matter of the milieu into which one was born. Later, he acknowledged that cultural capital is neither static nor linked to one's position within society, but rather, it can evolve, be acquired and be amassed dynamically in specific cultural domains. Taste in fashion as well as in food or home decor can be an innate gift that is developed with practice. It can't be learned in schools, but it can be acquired in

specific consumption domains. Once acquired, taste as cultural capital can be invested, further accumulated and traded for other forms of capital, much in the same way that money can. What consumers do on their fashion blogs can be described in these terms: They put themselves at risk to develop their power of judgment and taste and thereby amass more cultural capital. Their taste leadership wins over a large audience and provides an opportunity to improve their social position. Taste leadership elevates the bloggers from mere consumers to the status of insiders who stand at eye level with the professional fashion scene. It empowers them to earn returns on their public acts of consumption.

The road to success for fashion bloggers

From personal journal to sophisticated taste display /// Early posts give the impression that consumers were using the blog format as an online journal for personal disclosure, even though the blog names (e.g., ''FashionToast'' or ''Style Bubble'') indicate that they were meant for larger audiences. Soon, the posts ceased to resemble private social media posts aimed at friends and quickly begin to transition toward public displays of taste. The bloggers developed their individual profile by making their own fashion statements and not affiliating with specific groups or subcultures. They took risks by making unusual combinations, teasing out details of their choices and expressing opinionated and often eclectic evaluations. The vocabulary used for taste judgments was constantly refined, and these young women did not refrain from asserting strong points of view regarding what was and wasn't fashionable. Since their risky displays were more often judged as fashionable than not, they increased their cultural capital.

From community to audience /// In the early stage of their blogs, the authors would interact with their followers by answering questions and asking them what they would like to see. But as their audiences grew, the bloggers tended to ignore their followers and cultivate their autonomy by no longer answering questions or addressing issues raised in comments. Interestingly, this behavior seemed to improve a blogger's status, and they appeared to be perceived as even more audience-worthy. The bloggers established themselves as taste leaders with a sense of style.

From curating to modeling /// The blogs started by pulling fashion pictures from hundreds of brands on the Web, and the bloggers curated styles and rendered taste judgments using these ''borrowed'' pictures. Nine out of 10 bloggers soon started ''self-modeling''. Their audiences appreciated an active execution of their own styles. ''Daily wardrobe'' posts tended to be praised by followers and to increase their audience even more.

From snapshots to professional images /// Progress could be observed in their photographs. At the beginning, the photos appeared similar to snapshots ordinary consumers would share among themselves. Eventually, the bloggers learned to have professional-looking photographs taken of themselves as models. Part of the growing professionalism of the bloggers' pictures came from better training, equipment and Web technology, but much came from copying the poses and settings found in traditional fashion magazine ads. Just as they refined their verbal skills, they became more adroit with the visual and aesthetic vocabulary already established in the professional fashion system.

STUDYING FASHION BLOGS

We examined 10 personal fashion blogs that reached sizable audiences, all run by amateur consumers, all of them young women, The analysis included images and words and focused on displays of taste. What topics did the bloggers choose to discuss and not to discuss? What kinds of words and phrases were used and avoided? What was the content and style of the pictures displayed? We examined their development over time by comparing earlier and later blogging practices. The blog posts were our primary source; a secondary focus was placed on audience response to the taste judgments as seen in comments.

FIGURE 1:
Bloggers and their audience. Examples of statements



The growing sophistication and professionalization of style displays, favorable audience reactions and increased the size of the audience interactions constituted a self-reinforcing cultural capital loop as displayed in Figure 2.

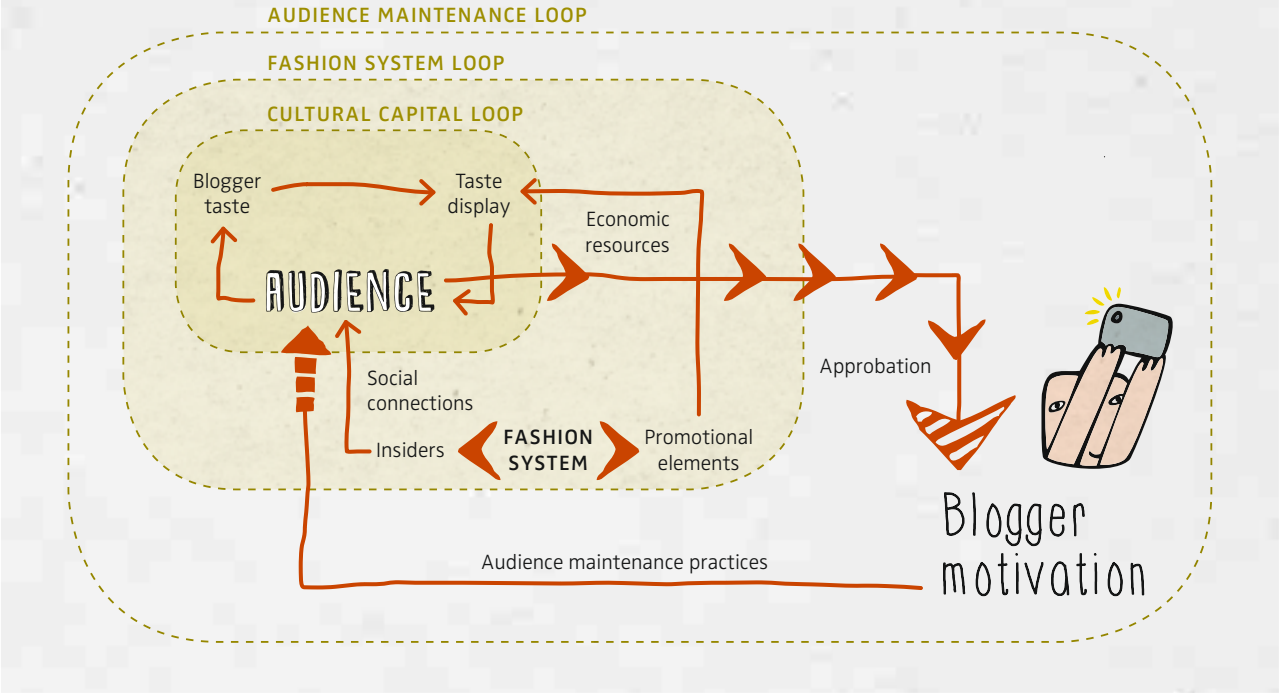
The blessings and risks of economic and social rewards

/// As their audience continued to grow, bloggers came to the attention of professionals in the fashion world, who sent economic resources their way. Economic rewards included gifts of branded fashion clothing and other merchandise, paid ad placements on the fashion blog and paid sponsorship of blog contests. Other paid assignments included modeling branded clothing, designing clothes and accessories and writing for publications. The social position of the bloggers improved as they received invitations to exclusive parties, runway shows, designer open houses, charity appearances and mentions in the media. These resources fueled further taste ventures and increased the bloggers' audience even more.

In this way the bloggers set up a second positive feedback loop. As their audience grew, they gained social connections to prominent insiders within the fashion world. This gave bloggers more prominence, which again enhanced the size of their audience among ordinary consumers, while also reinforcing the audience's perception of the blogger as a taste leader. Having an audience made a blogger valuable to marketers and to fashion insiders alike, and the interest of both increased their audience sizes and its approbation for them. This, in turn, recharged not only the fashion- system loop, but also the inner cultural-capital loop in Figure 2. Interestingly, increased commercialization of fashion blogs did not damage the authenticity of the bloggers or alienate followers. Rather the opposite effect could be observed: Unusual privileges and a bounty of gifts served to confirm a blogger's taste leadership.

However, the new privileges posed a different risk for the bloggers' success. The bloggers were no longer ordinary consumers like their followers. Their big advantage over professional fashion displays had always been that they were ordinary consumers, and their followers could easily believe, "I could look good in that, too!" Many blog comments illustrated this felt similarity and its importance. Privilege threatens this feeling. To maintain their audience, bloggers engaged in practices to deny the existence of boundaries. They feigned

FIGURE 2:
How a successful fashion blog develops cultural capital



similarity with their followers by addressing ordinary aspects of their lives, for example complaining about a small closet, or deliberately misrecognizing their privileges (''Hope to see you at fashion week!'') despite knowing that only those with invitations can attend fashion week. Such practices form the third and outermost loop of audience maintenance in Figure 2, which reinforces the other loops when the blogger succeeds in bridging the emerging gap.

Beyond online communities /// Amassing an audience by blogging is a very recent form of online consumer behavior. Earlier studies focused on the development of virtual communities and highlighted consumer efforts to find like-minded people. The emphasis was on peer-to-peer communities, what one might call the ''horizontal operation of taste'', where taste displays serve to attract those who share the same preferences. But it appears that consumers do not only seek community on the Web, they also look for taste leadership from selected peers. A few also seek positions in society in the eyes of a mass of strangers. These positions can now be attained by acts of consumption. In fact, courtesy of the Web, a new kind of social position has emerged: the taste leader who takes hold of the megaphone, builds an audience for his or her consumption, and thereby gains a status. Successful taste leadership by consumers is not limited to the domain of fashion, but may also be found in fields like food, interior design or decoration.

Although these bloggers started out as ordinary consumers, they were soon integrated into the professional fashion world and did not oppose it. Hence, they did not represent a threat to professional marketers so much as an alternative marketing opportunity within the complex web of social media.
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