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# 'Personal Style Blogs: Appearances that Fascinate'

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# Introduction

*'… where street and interior are one, historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and momentary come-ons, myriad displays of ephemera, thresholds for the passage for […] "the ghosts of material things."'*

—Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin in 'Translator's Foreword' to *The Arcades Project*.

The unfinished 'major project of Benjamin's mature years' (Buck-Morss 1989: iv), *The Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*) consists of a vast collection of cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin's notes on nineteenth-century Paris. It was a project in which he sought to trace the origins of modernism—and namely Paris, the archetypal modern city—in the materials of the nineteenth-century, the 'debris of mass culture' which, for Benjamin, contained the 'source of philosophical truth' (1989: iv).

Benjamin's notes were collected (and published) in *convolutes*, a term which Eiland and McLaughlin trace to the German *Konvolut*. It refers to 'a larger or smaller assemblage […] of manuscripts or printed materials that belong together', in English also carrying the connotation of 'being in a convoluted form' (Eiland and McLaughlin 2002: xiv). So it is with Benjamin's work, as his expansive, itinerant ideas are organised into dossiers around an organising topic— 'Fashion', 'Boredom, Eternal Return', and 'The Seine, The Oldest Paris', for example—in which historical source material is arranged next to Benjamin's oblique notes to self, next to excerpts of poetry by Baudelaire.

In the act of reading this work we partake in a kind of sedentary *flânerie*, as we move through the phantasmagorical city, Benjamin's nineteenth-century Paris growing around us through his collated notes and fragments. When I first encountered *The Arcades Project* I was struck by the similarity between reading the *convolutes* and reading personal style blogs, for reading style blogs is an uncannily similar experience. They too are comprised of fragments of text and images arranged around a theme— *blogposts*—that together constitute an image, albeit of a *style blogger* rather than an epoch, as in the case of Benjamin's work.

Here, too, the stationary reader travels through a peopled landscape; what they encounter, however, is not the reimagined Paris of burgeoning modernism, but bloggers' styled performances of self in a different liminal terrain, the spaces of their blogs. Here, too, as Johandeau observed of Benjamin's work, the effect is to render the blogger as 'everyone's contemporary' (Johandeau in Benjamin 2002: 66), in relation to whom the reader is positioned, by the conversational mode of address characteristic of personal blogs, as a curious, engaged passer-by.

This ambulatory mode of reading is aided by the hyperlinks that pervade such blogs: coded texts functioning as portals to other webpages that populate in a new window. On style blogs these often link to a previous post, a friend's blog, or an online store, possibilities with tangential relevance to the original post, holding it in balance with a teeming network of websites, blogs, images, and ideas. In fact, until recently, it was customary for style bloggers to keep a *blogroll*,

or list of hyperlinked titles of blogs that they liked, in the sidebar of their own, titles that often ran together like blank verse:

*july stars*
*white lightning*
*sea of ghosts*
*fashiontoast*
*hard liquor, soft holes*
*geometric sleep*
*fashion pirate*
*what is reality anyway?*

—legends that, with a single click, would spirit the reader onto another blog written in a different voice, peopled with images of another blogger performing her (or his) personal style through outfit posts that ran down the page back through time. For, once published, a blogpost remains anchored in its position in the reverse chronological order of a blog, while simultaneously existing in itself as a distinct cultural artefact of a blogger's opinions and outfit, as experienced in the day in which it was composed. And so the reader is peripatetic, conducted 'into vanished time' (Benjamin 2002: 416), or the a-temporal continuous present of blogs, as well as intangible place, an imagined and fantastical world inhabited by a style blogger's digitally performed self.

The style blogosphere is comprised of innumerable blogs. It thrives with informality, tangential connections, and the passions, ideas and enigmatic co-presence of bloggers and their readers. Style blogs are fantastical and everyday, public and domestic, personal and professional, each distinct and steeped in the individual aesthetic and performed selfhood of the blogger who created it. Both individually and collectively, they give rise to a new narrative about fashion and style, about the interplay between dressed self and the eye of the beholder.

Here is a beginning, then, as told through the courses charted by three early style bloggers— Susanna "Susie Bubble" Lau, who started *Style Bubble* in March 2006, Rumi Neely, whose blog *fashiontoast* was first published in January 2008, and Tavi Gevinson, who created *Style Rookie* in March 2008. Three young women created three blogs upon which they could publish materials circulating their interest in fashion and personal style with the vaguely sensed, unqualifiable, and desired "you" brought into proximity by the Internet. They did this primarily by staging amateur photo shoots featuring their daily outfits, enlisting the help of willing relatives and friends to take their photographs, posing in front of a camera on self-timer or, like Susie in the beginning, contorting themselves so that the lens captured their whole reflection in the full-length mirror in their bedroom.

They wore clothes that helped them to realise the look they wanted for themselves, whether that be pinning a plastic basket to a hip after being inspired by a designer's anti-organic, structural aesthetic, or shopping eBay to find the heavy designer boots, micro-shorts, and floaty tops that would become their signature. The photographs they took of these outfits slowly grew more sophisticated, as they experimented with outdoor locations, posing on a sun-drenched street, or in a wheat field, locations that had increasingly little to do with their outfit but that presented a picturesque backdrop.

These posts, flecked as they are with personal anecdotes, descriptions of 'delicious' clothes, and opinions declaring that '[eBay] is truly the land where dreams come true' (Neely, *fashiontoast*, January 19, 2009), demonstrate the

specificity of discourse that circulates on the style blogosphere. Style bloggers don't adopt the fashionable person's urbane, 'blasé-cool' demeanour, which as Elizabeth Wilson describes, 'mask[s] all emotions, save triumph' (1985:9): rather, Susie, Rumi, and Tavi blogged as enthusiastic consumers, 'everywoman's style icons' (Bourne 2010) who shaped their personal style according to their taste, and furthermore, who invited their readers to engage with them at the interface of that style.

That this enthusiasm was intrinsically tied to the fashion product gradually led to fashion labels and their PR extending opportunities to certain style bloggers: mailing clothes to them as gifts, inviting bloggers to their studios or workshops so they could see how the goods they admired were made, and eventually inviting some to attend their fashion shows. Within a year of starting her blog, Tavi received hand-knitted Rodarte tights and a cardigan as a gift from the label's designers. Susie was one of fifteen bloggers invited by Chanel to visit a series of locations important to the house: their *parfumerie* in Neuilly, the route that Coco Chanel used to walk between the Ritz hotel and her shop on Rue Cambon, and, holy of holies, a tour of Chanel's apartment, famously closed to the public. Rumi was signed as a model by the Next Model Management agency and was shot as the "face" of high street label Forever 21 as part of the launch of their flagship store in Times Square, later blogging about how weird it was to hail a cab with her face on it.

Opportunities such as these, as well as the novelty of style blogging, led to widespread media interest in bloggers. With their increased visibility came the

expansion and rapid transformation of the style blogosphere, as more people created blogs of their own and in ever-increasing number adopted conventions that had proven successful for the blogs that preceded them. The rapid shift is evident in the content of their blogs: for example, Tavi joked about meeting 'the big Mama Vogue herself' on *Style Rookie* in 2008, and blogged a photograph of herself with Anna Wintour less than two years later.

These experiences, although not shared by all bloggers, illustrate the main aspects of style blogging with which this book engages: its history and development as a sub-genre of fashion blogging; the styled selves bloggers publicly perform on the spaces of their blogs; the distanced sociality between bloggers and readers; and the response of the fashion industry to style bloggers' amateur and unauthorised fashion reportage. In so doing, it provides a comprehensive overview of what personal style blogging is and what it means for those who do it. Each chapter addresses a different aspect of the practice, offering detailed analysis that develops central themes that cumulatively build into a cohesive map of style blogging. Some of these themes are explored more explicitly than others, which thread through the fabric of my argument, yet all have arisen from my close study of the style blogosphere, both in the eighteen months before commencing this research and during the four years of my doctoral candidature, when the majority of this work was originally developed.

This book asks what style bloggers think they are doing, what the practice means for them, and what it means for their readers. It intertwines the lived experience of those who constitute the style blogosphere with broader discussions, such as

the significance of the practice for fashion communication and for private individuals—who are mostly female and young— writing publicly about their opinions, interests and lives. The dominant themes explored in this work are the performance of self that occurs through clothing on a digital platform for an audience, and the tension between the 'old' and the 'young' (to borrow from Bourdieu, 1993a: 57), be it teenaged girl bloggers and their disapproving adult critics, or the professional fashion media opposing the challenge posed by style bloggers' unauthorised fashion communication.

This work also makes definitional arguments about style blogging by providing a language with which we can speak about style blogs, one that can be advanced as the blogosphere continues to develop. I here establish how we can construe the spaces of style blogs, how the style blogger-reader relationship can be conceptualised, and how outfit posts can be understood as complex and reflexive performances of self through style.

My first chapter outlines the history of personal style blogging as a sub-genre of the fashion blogosphere, tracing its origins through fashion-based websites and forums as well as early fashion blogs. What emerged as I researched this project was a distinction between two phases of style blogging, both of which were predicated on a different ethos and comprised of a distinct mode of blogging. I map these two phases, and in doing so, demonstrate that style blogging was shaped not only by the practice of early style bloggers but also by the digital media that informed how they blogged. The characteristics that still demarcate style blogging as a specific kind of fashion-based blogging were developed by

early bloggers, whose contributions were implicitly challenged and built upon by the style bloggers who came after, themselves influenced by the media coverage and commercial opportunities that had become part of what style blogging offered.

The theme of style blogging 'offering' something is taken up in the next chapter as I examine the gendered criticism that style bloggers have attracted by writing publicly about their personal interest in fashion. Rather than being understood as risky or narcissistic, style blogging can be situated within the lineage of feminine sociality and writing about personal experience, both of which are antecedents to this mode of expression. A significant concern here is what kind of communication and forms of sociality style blogs engender between bloggers and their readers. I argue that style blogs are intimate spaces of identity play and social engagement between peers, albeit at a remove of time and place, drawing on the work of Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, and Siân Lincoln to read style blogs as the digital equivalent of girls' bedrooms. Style bloggers demonstrate a number of competencies to negotiate their public presence, as evident in the interviews and analyses of blogposts presented in this chapter, which reveal the capability of many girl bloggers to navigate the challenges and potential risks of being visible and, in some ways accessible, online.

The question of communication is further considered in Chapter Three, as I extend my analysis into a re-reading of style blogs as *intimate publics*, adapting Lauren Berlant's work on publics *pace* Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner. Surprisingly little has been written about the reciprocal and affective

relationship between personal style bloggers and their readers, a gap which this chapter seeks to address. I describe the intimacy at a remove that characterises the blogger-reader relationship, drawing on my own experiences as a blogger and a reader, as well as the survey responses I gathered from readers of style blogs to formulate an overview of the dynamics of this relationship. The term I adopt here, intimate publics, accounts for the affective quality inherent in relationality on style blogs, as well as the ways that style blogs address an unknown but felt and in some ways familiar audience.

I turn in Chapter Four to consider the ways that style bloggers employ the capacities of blogs to perform stylish selves, selves that are performatively enacted through blogged text and images. This position encourages a re-consideration of the digital identities of style bloggers, moving away from the notion of blogs facilitating an unmediated expression of self to a more nuanced analysis of the interplay between digitally writing/presenting the self and identity.

This discussion has two main points, both of which are predicated on concepts of performance and performativity. In the first, I look at outfit post photography as a development of fashion photography, one in which the style blogger positions herself within *fashion's imaginary*, an imaginary that circulates through the fantastical and fictional world of professional fashion photography. Markedly different here is that style bloggers are assuming the role of "fashion's ideal", a figure that inhabits the imagined world of fashion imagery but which is subverted on style blogs by the knowledge that these bloggers are not characters

but people depicting their lives. There is a slippage between what is revealed and what is concealed in these posts, as is contiguous with the ambiguous world of fashion photography where the visual currency is aspiration and desire.

Yet outfit posts also function as performance in another way—or, rather, I argue that they are performative, as style bloggers bring their digital selves into being by creating and publishing them. I look here at the ways that personal style feeds into this becoming self by conducting a case study of Rosalind Jana, a British blogger who concealed and then revealed her severe scoliosis from her readers as a means of reconciling herself with her condition.

The final chapter of this book situates personal style blogs within the field of fashion media, arguing that the practice has developed from a position of exclusion, countering the discourse and values of the fashion industry, to holding a contested yet increasingly consolidated position within the field. This shift is examined through a Bourdieusian analysis of the struggle for legitimacy, both between style bloggers and the professional fashion media as well as between opposing groups of style bloggers. I here examine the manner in which certain bloggers have been consecrated by dominant agents in the field, and for what reasons, and detail the rupture this has caused within the style blogosphere. In these ways, this book charts the development of the style blogosphere in relation to the fashion media, arguing that the practice of style blogging challenges the established hierarchy of the field while its organising ethos and characteristics are themselves developed by the fashion media, resulting in the consecration of some style bloggers over others.

**Style Blogs as Online Performances of Self**

The multitude of different disciplinary approaches already applied to the study of personal style blogs speaks to the range of possible lines of enquiry that might illuminate this phenomenon. Indeed, by sitting at the nexus of a number of conceptual intersections, style blogging requires a range of theoretical perspectives to address its multiple facets.

The insights and perspectives garnered in my work have been shaped by my situation as a scholar within performance studies, a hybrid discipline that invites us to consider a diversity of human performance with a range of theoretical approaches. As performance studies scholar Richard Schechner has noted, 'there is no finality to performance studies, either theoretically or operationally. There are many voices, opinions, methods, and subjects' (2002: 1).

In that spirit, the development and research focus of this study has been guided by my situation as a scholar in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, which builds its theoretical focus on what Maxwell defines as 'four pillars': historiography, anthropology, embodiment, and analysis (2006: 37). A central underlying aim, influenced by the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is to approach an understanding of what the subjects of a study think they are doing. This approach directs our attention away from reading texts towards engaging with process—or the "performance"—which Schechner calls the 'between': the 'actions, interactions, and relationships' that constitute human sociality (2002: 24).

Understood in this way, the concept of performance itself comes to encompass everyday performances as well as live, aesthetic Performances—or 'performance (p)' and 'Performance (P)' (Lewis 2013: 9)—two modes that constitute two ends of a continuum rather than operating in binary opposition. This distinction allows for slippages between 'P/p' performances, a fluid conception of human behaviour within which style blogs are situated, comprised as they are of both everyday performances of self (as activity enacted out of a blogger's everyday life) as well as aesthetic Performances of a kind, as bloggers style and display a performative self for their readers on their blogs.

This identifying feature of style blogging—the performance of a styled self for readers—is accounted for by Goffman's definition of performance as:

> all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by
> his [*sic*] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and
> which has some influence on the observers (1973: 22).

The key aspects of this definition—an individual, their activity, before a set of observers, with influence on the observers—are developed by Fitzpatrick's work on performance, in which he draws out the complexities between performer and audience. He writes that performance involves a performer displaying 'personal resources' or 'performative skill' to an audience in a situation in which their behaviour is 'framed' as particular and therefore marked as a performance (1995: 51). Fitzpatrick argues that this transaction is more complex than an

interaction, specifically because of the performer's responsibility to display their skill—what anthropologist and folklorist Richard Bauman calls 'communicative competence' (quoted in Fitzpatrick 1995: 51).

In these terms, we can understand bloggers as assuming the role of performer, their behaviour framed as performance by its location on the site of their blog. Readers constitute the audience, who respond to the display of a blogger's personal resources—their style, their physical appearance, their skill at writing blogposts, and so on—and whose engagement with a blogger's performed self is facilitated by their blog being accessible online. This latter point marks a 'continuous presence' (as identified as an aspect of performance by Goffman), if not in a temporal sense, then in a sense of being continuously publicly available. The influence that style bloggers wield on their observers is evident in a number of ways, not least as implied by the proliferation of commercial agreements between bloggers and fashion labels, but also through their influence on their readers as authorities on style, and evident in the circulation of fashion trends particular to the style blogosphere.

In conceptualising bloggers as performers, the notion of their behaviour as performance becomes a central concept. What this perspective contests is the notion of the self as a stable, fixed entity that can then be represented on a blog. I will argue that *aspects* of self can be expressed through blogging, but that these actions are not indicative of a prior, offline selfhood; rather, following the lead of de Beauvoir and Butler, I take a phenomenologically-inflected position, arguing that the self is a self *becoming*. This is not to suggest that the body pre-exists as

some kind of *tabula rasa* but rather that identity is flexible, enacted, and 'tenuously constituted in time' (Butler 1988: 519), informed by an individual's corporeal body, their subjectivity, and their position within their own socio-cultural life-world. As 'one does one's body', one 'does' one's identity, the performance of which is contingent on context; or, in Butler's own words, which 'must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities' (1988: 521).

Of course, when we approach people-in-their-clothes online, people made visible through careful representation of their selves and accounts of their lived experience, we are also approaching texts. By reading style blogs as sites at which bloggers perform their style for their readers, my work seeks to reconcile theories of the embodied nature of intersectional identity formation through clothing with the distance and virtuality that characterises digital technologies. In this spirit, this book examines the kinds of selves brought into being on style blogs, and questions the relationship between those blogged selves and the style displayed on them, both in the imagery of outfit posts and through the language employed by bloggers to perform themselves for their readers.

Performance studies also inflected my implementation of a practice-led methodology, as it is discipline that favours observation and participant-observation as modes of gathering knowledge about a subject. Schechner goes as far as to argue that 'the relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral', advocating anthropological fieldwork even in studying

one's own culture to assume a 'Brechtian distance, allowing for criticism […] and personal commentary as well as sympathetic participation' (2002: 2).

 This approach becomes fundamental when considering style blogs, which are predominantly composed by girls and young women. In developing an overview of what style blogging is, I am attempting to understand the writing and performances of self of thousands of individuals who are more than capable of speaking for themselves. In fact, part of what makes style blogs such an exciting development in the history of women's writing is just that: young women and girls now have recourse to speak publicly about their own lived experience and creatively display aspects of their selfhood. In light of this, it is essential to me as a researcher to understand what these bloggers and their readers think they are doing so as not to claim to speak for them without acknowledging that they themselves are able to speak—and do, often daily—on their blogs.

**Researching style blogs**

My sentiments in conducting research on personal style blogs have often echoed those of Etienne Gilson who, reflecting on researching the work of Dante, observed that

> [a]s for the vast literature […] I cannot think of it without experiencing a
> kind of dizziness. One cannot open an Italian review without saying to
> oneself: 'Another book, another article that I ought to have read before
> expressing my opinion on this question!' (1963: x).

Dizzying, too, is the prospect of attempting to survey the entire style blogosphere and come to a comprehensive conclusion that encompasses it for the reader. Such an attempt would be quixotic if not ridiculous: the style blogosphere is ever expanding, the blogs that constitute it constantly being updated, abandoned, or created. As Viviane Serfaty observed in her own study on American online diaries, an author's claim to an exhaustive study of digital cultures is 'precluded by the sheer infiniteness of Internet contents' (2004: 16).

Rather than attempt to cover all aspects of the style blogosphere, then, my methodological approach was developed to address my own specific research concerns: an interest in what blogging means for the bloggers and readers who do it and what the emergence of this sub-genre of fashion blogging has meant for the concept of the individual in the public sphere and for the communication of fashion knowledge. Each method educes different elements of style blogging in an attempt to engage with it in the midst of its complexity and dynamism.

I have here separated the three main approaches I took in gathering research, although in practice they were being simultaneously enacted. Each method led to the other two in a kind of hermeneutic circle, if the text being studied could be substituted for the style blogosphere—by which I designate bloggers, their readers, and the blogs upon which these two parties converge. My first methodological approach was participant-observation: I conducted an auto-ethnography by starting a blog, *Fashademic*, to engage at an interpersonal level with other bloggers and readers and so to understand blogging from the inside out. I also conducted interviews with a range of bloggers, and linked an

anonymous survey to my blog to be completed by my readers, to gain insight into how these people conceived of what they were doing and what it meant to them. Finally, I sought to balance these approaches by engaging in textual analysis, in which I critically engaged with a range of style blogs. To echo performance studies scholar Ian Maxwell, I 'do not wish to privilege one mode of knowing over another' but to suggest through the employment of three epistemological approaches that 'different modes of knowing will produce different kinds of knowledge' (2001: 44), and that these knowledge's together constitute a more thorough theoretical perspective.

I first encountered style blogs in late 2008, when I was living in Toronto. Already an avid reader of street style blogs, I came upon a number of early style blogs in the casual way germane to the Internet: one click, and I was in a new country peopled by strangers who—excitingly—spoke my language. They were like me and I was like them: fashion fans. We weren't fashion fans the way people are now, following the fashion famous on Instagram or trying to break into the 'scene' in our respective locations. Rather, we were the types who grew up poring over images in treasured magazines, who remembered collections once seen on Style.com and never forgotten, and who tried to recreate the looks we loved—wherever they were first encountered, be they on the street, in an editorial or conjured by our own imaginations—whether or not we had access to the desired fashion product.

Following these bloggers— shoe-mad Jane Aldridge in Texas who mixed vertiginous designer heels with 80's vintage, Californian Rumi Neely who shifted

from wearing floral minidresses from Urban Outfitters to an aesthetic of floaty mixed with bodycon that would become her trademark, Susie Bubble in London who never met a print she didn't like, Camille Rushnaedy who always posed for her outfit posts between the edge of the fireplace in her living room and a rather large ceramic urn, Tavi Gevinson, who lived in suburban Illinois and crafted looks inspired by fictional characters and runway looks, fashion student Brooke Kao who bemoaned 'The Fashion Void That is D.C.' (also the name of her blog) and snapped her outfit posts in her empty design studio between classes, and so many others—became part of my everyday. I was excited to discover these people and, inspired by them, started my own fashion blog, called *Anywhere Anywear*. My favourite post should illustrate the kind of fashion interest that was being enacted then on the style blogosphere: being mutually inspired by the all-white aesthetic of the Chanel 2009 couture show and my first winter in the Northern Hemisphere, I crafted a Chanel 2.55 bag out of snow for the express purpose of blogging it. I used a ruler to carve the quilting and shaped the clasp made of interlocking C's with fingers that gradually turned numb. Of course I then took photographs of my masterpiece in a kind of Chanel-esque monochrome flat-lay with carefully arranged black leather gloves. This snowy homage would seem kind of odd to most people in my life, but I felt that online, people would get it.

I call this way of engaging with fashion a *fashion interest* after the Latin inflection of the word meaning to differ or be important, having an interest denoting a possession of something.  The first style bloggers and their readers had an interest in fashion in the truest sense, possessing fashion conceptually,

performing style through their posts and creatively inhabiting the possibilities and aesthetics of clothing. Tavi created outfits out of hand-me-downs, Etsy finds and glister from her childhood dress up box. Laia (*Geometric Sleep*) eulogised the Marc Jacobs heels from 2001 that got away. Queen Michelle (*Kingdom of Style*) rhapsodised about her new Black Milk leggings and modelled them to us from her backyard in Glasgow. Perhaps these longings and creative impulses were fostered by their distance from the professional fashion industry, not experienced so much as an exclusion (as it is often termed) as something that was located entirely elsewhere. These bloggers had their own ways of communing with fashion and to articulate and celebrate these on the early style blogosphere was sufficient.

Besides a mutual fashion interest, I shared other similarities with these early style bloggers: despite our differences in nationality, ethnic identity, age and geographic location, like them, I was also a middle-class English-speaking young woman with regular access to a computer and an Internet connection. As I moved back to Sydney to pursue my doctorate, I discarded *Anywhere Anywear*, deleting its archives and starting afresh with *Fashademic* in 2010 when I commenced my candidature. Although I had dabbled in fashion blogging, *Anywhere Anywear* was not a style blog, and although reading other blogs taught me the conventions of the genre, I did not know how it felt to do it myself. I started *Fashademic* for this reason, yet I also wished to contrast my own experiences of reading and blogging against those of others, which led me to conduct interviews. The answers given in interviews prompted me to go back and reread blogposts, to contrast what bloggers said in conversation with what

they had blogged, which also gave rise to new questions. The three

methodological approaches I employed were thus enmeshed, each always

drawing my enquiries into a more complex engagement with style blogging

while also prompting me towards the other approaches to balance the

limitations of each. In this next section I will outline these limitations and also

the strengths of the three aspects of my methodology, justifying my approach

and demonstrating how the inherent biases of these approaches are somewhat

addressed by their simultaneous implementation.

*Researcher as personal style blogger*

Creating *Fashademic* involved selecting a blog-hosting platform upon which to

create my blog (I chose Blogger), choosing a blog title, and selecting which

template to use, which I tweaked by selectively recoding its HTML.[4] Most of this

was relatively simple: the Blogger template is deliberately designed to be easy

for first-time users to navigate. I also created a statistics tracking account on a

free website and embedded the tracking code into my HTML so that I could

observe the traffic on my blog. During the course of my candidature, I also linked

a dedicated Facebook page and Twitter account to *Fashademic*, using these social

media platforms to reach new readers and to publish different content that

complemented the content of my blogposts.[5] I usually blogged multiple times a

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[4] "HTML", or Hypertext Markup Language, is the main language used to create web
pages, blogs and other information that can be displayed in a Web browser. It is written
using specific codes that determine the appearance of a blog including layout, colour
schemes, fonts, and so on.
[5] The *Fashademic* Facebook Page is no longer active, deleted in mid-2013 when I deleted
my personal Facebook account.

week, but the regularity of my posting fluctuated throughout my candidature, sometimes resulting in multiple posts a day, sometimes only once weekly.

I posted about a range of subjects related to my studies and experiences as a post-graduate student and also on my interest in fashion, with a particular focus on creating posts that fulfilled the conventions of style blogging. That is, I wrote in a conversational tone about my personal style and taste in fashion, and blogged outfit posts as well as fashion-based content that I reblogged from other websites. Moreover, I accepted opportunities as they arose to do what other style bloggers did: I attended fashion shows at Rosemount Australia Fashion Week in 2011; I styled and shot product couriered to my house as negotiated with a label's PR agency; I attended 'blogger events'; and was directly approached numerous times by small fashion labels for coverage or to advertise on my blog. [6] At the same time, I read other style blogs on a daily basis, occasionally making contact with bloggers about their posts, or products or articles that I thought might be of interest to them. In all of these ways, I immersed myself as much as possible in the practice of style blogging, although I never pursued this as a commercial enterprise nor a full-time occupation. My blog was therefore more akin to early style blogs, an activity pursued for pleasure as an amateur, although my participation was also inflected by my position as a researcher and observer.

There are a number of reasons that this methodological approach was important for my research. As previously discussed, mediating performance practice and

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[6] The event was rebranded and retitled 'Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Australia' (MBAFW) in 2012.

theoretical study produces an anthropologically inflected mode of embodied knowing, making visible to the researcher aspects of a practice that would otherwise elude them. The knowledge at stake here is that which an individual has about their everyday activities, which is opaque and difficult to access without participation in those very activities that make it available. A blogger might, for example, say in an interview that they do not really know who is reading their blog but that they have a sense for the kinds of people that might constitute their readership. In blogging myself, I felt firsthand what this sensed knowing is like: an affinity with a largely anonymous presence, a kind of familiarity that influenced the way that I wrote "to them" and that flared into pleased surprise when someone new wrote me an email or left a comment saying they liked my blog.

This example illustrates the intimate knowing that arises from doing something, a knowing that casts a new understanding on the significance of an activity for those who engage in it. The embodied self of the auto-ethnographer becomes a locus of knowledge in that, as Luvaas writes, 'paying particular attention to one's thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations [constitutes] a form of ethnographic "data"' (2016: 12). At the same time, the automatic knowing that arises from immersing oneself in doing must be balanced against periods of reflexivity, as the researcher moves between proximity and critical distance in order to make sense of what they have experienced or continue to experience. This combination of personal perspective and distanced analysis—or what anthropologist Clifford Geertz would call 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts—works to create a thorough epistemological understanding of

an activity by getting at it through the understanding of its constituents and then analysing the way that they account for what it is that they are doing (1983: 57). In being a blogger myself, then, I was not only seeking to 'make the familiar strange' (see Geertz 1975), but also to make the strange familiar by incorporating blogging into my everyday life.

Of course, participant observation is not without its significant biases. Digital theorist Viviane Serfaty argues that it 'entails a number of specific distortions' due to the direct contact with subjects and immersion in their activities (2004: 11). Furthermore, as Maxwell argues, it is important to acknowledge 'the very active role of the ethnographer in constructing the object they might have, at one time, claimed to be simply describing' (2002: 111). In that spirit, then, I follow Maxwell's lead in being reflexive according to the practice (as advocated by Bourdieu) of paying heed to, and acknowledging the epistemological effects of, the specific biases that my position in relation to—indeed, within— the field of style blogging will have engendered in my research.

In order to extend a *sens pratique* (or "practical sense") of a field, which he likens to a sportsman's 'feel for the game', Bourdieu advocates that an agent—here, myself as researcher-blogger—is reflexive about their relation to and practices within cultural fields (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002: 49). This reflexivity works against a researcher's naturalisation of a field—that is, the way that we inherently know, embody, and understand the logics and imperatives of the field—which perpetuates the pre-existing frameworks by which the field is internally organised rather than to expose and challenge them. In order to do

this, Bourdieu advises paying particular attention to three aspects of one's practice: our social and cultural origins; our position in the field in which we are located, and to be aware of our 'intellectual bias' (Bourdieu was talking specifically about academics conducting research), by which he meant to avoid abstracting practices and 'to see them as ideas to be contemplated, rather than problems to be solved' (2002: 50-51).

To briefly apply Bourdieu's method to myself, then, I acknowledge that the way I approach style blogs is mediated by my own interest in the phenomenon, as well as my process of knowing as a research student. As well as sharing a socio-cultural background similar to that of many other style bloggers, I also share a proximal age and gender with the principal demographic of style bloggers, girls and young women. As previously described, like all style bloggers, I too had a prior interest in and enjoyment of fashion, and furthermore, I have enjoyed the socio-economic ability to accrue a wardrobe of clothes that were not purchased primarily for function or necessity. Whilst the socio-economic status of bloggers greatly varies from the affluent who frequently buy designer items to those who only "thrift" or wear second-hand clothes (which admittedly is sometimes also for ethical and environmental rather than financial reasons), style bloggers for the most part enjoy the means, at least in some capacity, to consume clothes and accessories according to desire rather than need, a situation that I shared.

These similarities alone demonstrate my proximity to the field of style blogging, and yet overarching these is that, like many style bloggers, I am part of the generation first claimed as 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001), having grown up

during a time in which the use of digital technologies in everyday life in the West was burgeoning. Digital nativity encompasses anyone who is a so-called 'native speaker' of digital technologies (2001: 1) by way of being born into a world where such technologies are commonplace. Coded into the concept is the situation of such people within a socio-economic bracket where it is financially possible for digital technologies to be integrated into daily practices and accessible in sites at which they live: their homes, schools, universities, and so on. Such a bracket is one in which most style bloggers (including myself) are situated, as attested by the regularity of their posting from their home, phone or personal computer, and visually supported with images taken on personal digital cameras. The technologies that have been gradual additions to my life have come to feel natural to me, to the extent that even though I remember a time when technologies like mobile phones or Internet connectivity were novel, they now feel like integral and irreplaceable components of my everyday life.

Marc Prensky makes this very argument, stating that so ubiquitous and comprehensive is this immersion in technologies for my generation (and those subsequent) that we 'think and process information fundamentally differently from [our] predecessors' (2001: 2). Without wishing to engage with the physiological aspect of Prensky's argument—that this different processing of information is attributable to the structure of our brains being physically changed as a result of prolonged immersion in technological activities—the distinction he makes between those who grew up with technologies such as the Internet and those who did not, and how we think about these technologies as well as how we use them, is useful here.

The insiderness that I experience as a '"native speaker" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet' positions me differently within the field of style blogging than someone who is what Prensky would call a 'digital immigrant', or who has adopted technologies but was not 'born into' them (2001: 1-2). Certain behaviours that might appear as natural to me may seem problematic to other theorists, a point illustrated by new media professor Clay Shirky who commented that 'it is a constant surprise to those of us over a certain age [...] that large parts of our life can end up online. But that's not a behavior anyone under 30 has had to unlearn' (quoted in Nussbaum 2007: 3).

Thus, some of my socio-cultural origins and my position in relation to the field are revealed: a middle-class young woman who grew up during the time of the widespread adoption of technologies into the daily leisure and work lives of civilians. These factors obviously affected my process of knowing style blogging, not only in that they made certain aspects of the practice seem unremarkable to me through my shared familiarity with the technologies style bloggers employ as well as the factors that make such an activity possible in the first place, but also in that these similarities may have made it easier for me to engage with the field as a blogger: I wrote and looked and seemed like "one of them" as in many senses, I was.

Yet my position was also constituted in and through distance. I started a style blog as part of my research methodology, after all, not primarily because I had a desire to start one. Thus my participation in the style blogosphere was also

inflected by my role as a researcher, as I blogged to gather material with which I could unpack the practice. Indeed, my position as a researcher/blogger marked me as different within the style blogosphere by virtue of my academic motivation for blogging. I wrote about my research in my posts and identified myself as a PhD candidate researching personal style blogs on my "About Me" page and in my "Bio" on the right hand side of my blog (see Figure I1). As such, I felt myself to be in the minority on the style blogosphere, feeling my involvement to be partial as I was always shifting between being immersed in the doing and analysing myself doing the doing.
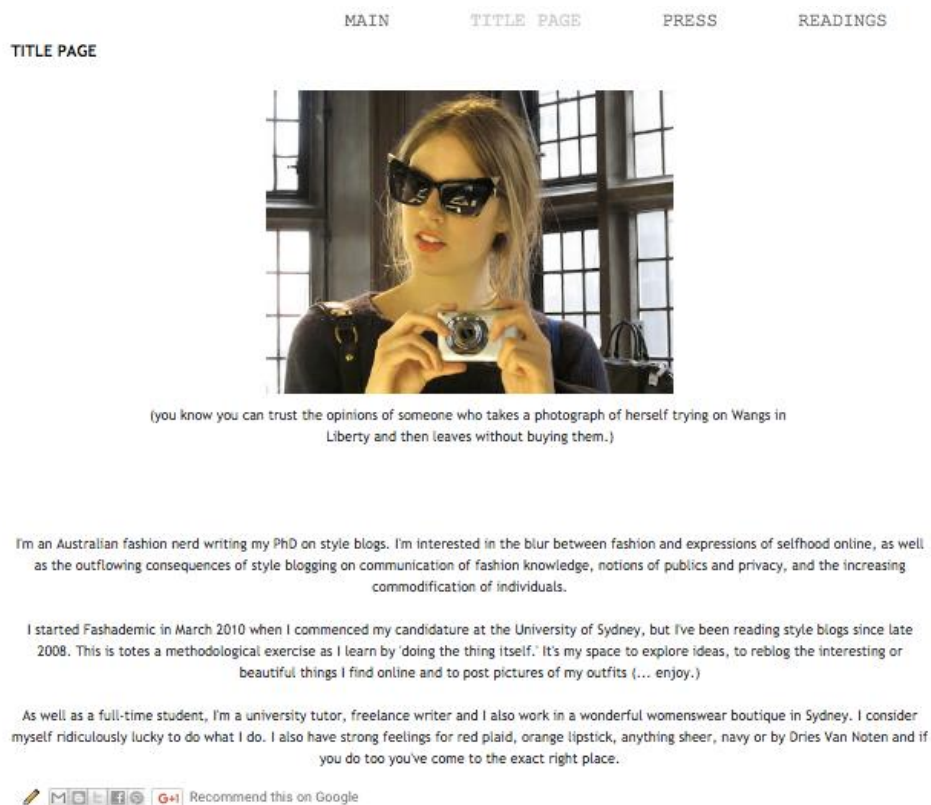


MAIN     TITLE PAGE     PRESS     READINGS

TITLE PAGE

(you know you can trust the opinions of someone who takes a photograph of herself trying on Wangs in Liberty and then leaves without buying them.)

I'm an Australian fashion nerd writing my PhD on style blogs. I'm interested in the blur between fashion and expressions of selfhood online, as well as the outflowing consequences of style blogging on communication of fashion knowledge, notions of publics and privacy, and the increasing commodification of individuals.

I started Fashademic in March 2010 when I commenced my candidature at the University of Sydney, but I've been reading style blogs since late 2008. This is totes a methodological exercise as I learn by 'doing the thing itself.' It's my space to explore ideas, to reblog the interesting or beautiful things I find online and to post pictures of my outfits (... enjoy.)

As well as a full-time student, I'm a university tutor, freelance writer and I also work in a wonderful womenswear boutique in Sydney. I consider myself ridiculously lucky to do what I do. I also have strong feelings for red plaid, orange lipstick, anything sheer, navy or by Dries Van Noten and if you do too you've come to the exact right place.

✏ M◻⬡⬛◉ G+1 Recommend this on Google

Figure I1. This screenshot of the About Me section ('Title Page') of *Fashademic*, demonstrates the tone in which I wrote to my readers and how I flagged that I was conducting research through my blogging practice.

In this way, my participation was mediated by my reflexivity, perhaps limiting the involvement that I was having by drawing me back and leading me to consider what I—and those around me—were doing. It is difficult not to be reminded of Bourdieu here, and the third aspect he cites as important for overcoming the limitations under which we labour in the field of research, which is 'intellectual bias', or the tendency of academics to 'abstract' practices and see them as 'ideas to be contemplated' (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002: 50-51). Yet despite my tendency to engage in the blogosphere while bearing my research interests in mind, my very engagement in its practices—taking and uploading outfit photos, interacting with companies that wished to work with me to monetise my readership, and writing about my personal style—prevented me from abstracting it. My sustained readership of certain style blogs led me to feel an affectionate familiarity with their bloggers, and my own blogging revealed to me affective aspects of blogging that I had otherwise not experienced, aspects I will describe more fully as they arise throughout this work.

For these reasons, I would not characterise my experiences of style blogging as typical. Furthermore, *Fashademic* was not a typical style blog. As such, while this experience usefully draws out aspects of the experience of style blogging, it is not necessarily representative of the experiences of style bloggers who primarily blog about their personal style. However, the value of this ethnographic research should not be discounted because of this specificity, as the similarities of situation between myself and other style bloggers, the content of my blog as mostly characteristic of a style blog (as I will later demonstrate), and my

extended participation on the style blogosphere made available a wealth of knowledge that would otherwise be difficult to access.

As a corollary, I had a somewhat self-selecting readership, as I assume that those reading *Fashademic* were readers interested in my scholarly pursuits as well as the rest of the blog's content, which would usually be the sole focus of a style blog. My readership, then, was not necessarily representative of style blog readers. Yet at the same time, as their responses to my anonymous survey indicated, many read a range of style blogs, and so their responses in regards to why they read style blogs and their perceived connection to style bloggers offers a valuable insight.

I deliberately sought to include a wide range of experiences of style blogging from other bloggers and readers, so that my work would not overly represent my own experience. What was striking were the similarities between my own experiences and those of others despite the specificities of *Fashademic* and my own intermediate position on the blogosphere as researcher/blogger. My experiences of style blogging, then, while particular, were consistent with a range of other bloggers' experiences. I will draw out these similarities throughout this work, making clear the context of my own experience and nuancing it with the lived experience of other bloggers. This is a significant aspect of ethnographic practice, as what is at stake is 'specifically, the lived, embodied experience of others' (Maxwell 2002: 110): ethnographic research does not seek to privilege the experiences of the researcher but rather to bring the researcher closer to the lived experience of others.

*In conversation with others*

I usually approached bloggers for interview on the basis of their posts: if a style blogger had written a post reflecting on their blogging experiences, I would email them explaining my project and asking them to speak with me. On one occasion, I approached an Australian blogger (Kayla Telford-Brock) who I knew as a friend before we both started blogging, and our interview grew out of a prior conversation we had about the influence of other blogs on our own. The rest of the interviewees were people I had never met before contacting them in regards to this project.

I sought a diverse range of bloggers, interviewing seven in total: six female and one male ranging between the ages of 16 years old to in their early 30s. Two were Australian, two Canadian, two were American and one was British. I also approached a number of other bloggers who made no reply to my advances— two Australian, two American and one British. Most of my interviews were conducted over Skype due to my location in Sydney, Australia, which made conducting interviews in person difficult.

I also wrote a short survey comprising of multiple choice and short answer questions for readers of style blogs to reflect anonymously on their own experiences. I did this in order to counter and contrast my own observations of being a reader with those of others. I created the survey using a free website (Survey Monkey), a link to which I embedded in a post introducing the survey to my readers (see Findlay, *Fashademic*, January 10, 2012), which I also pasted into

my blog's HTML so that a pop-up window would populate in my reader's browsers when they came to my blog. I also posted a link to this survey on my profile on the Independent Fashion Bloggers website, with a short text inviting any interested blog readers to participate. The survey was active from January 2012 to July 2013 and during this time, 84 people responded.

*Reading what they blogged*

My third methodological approach was to approach style blogs as published literary and visual works that can be analysed as such to be further understood. This is an approach defended by Viviane Serfaty, who wrote an excellent discussion on the ethical challenges facing a researcher of online personal writing (2004). Serfaty defends the use of the online diaries she studied as primary sources, and the identificatory, copyright and privacy issues this entailed, on the grounds that they 'were certainly personal, often intimate but not private' (2004:12), and that they could therefore be analysed as literary works designed for public consumption. This is a perspective easily applied to personal style blogs, as although they are private texts in the sense that they are written from an individual's point of view, they are also public in the sense that they are published on a freely accessible platform: a blog on the Internet. Moreover, bloggers often actively seek to build their readership by interacting with others in the comments section underneath their posts and creating a presence on various social media sites that are linked to their blogs in an attempt to expose their work to a bigger potential audience. During my candidature these included Facebook Groups (which became 'Pages' in mid-2012), Twitter and Instagram accounts, and Pinterest boards.

Studying blogs as texts balanced the subjectivity of my participant-observation data in a similar way to interviews, by incorporating material from a range of authors, thereby producing a more cohesive and comprehensive picture of this kind of blogging. At the same time, unlike interviews, the content of blogs is written for a wide audience, not directed at a researcher, and so also addresses the potential bias of interviews. That is, that an interviewee will frame their responses to reflect what they think the researcher want to hear: as anthropologist Michael Jackson suggests, 'the knowledge whereby one lives is not necessarily identical with the knowledge whereby one explains life' (1996: 2).

In a broader sense, as my work is focused on style blogging as a practice it was important for me to examine what bloggers do when they blog: how are they performing themselves through the technological, visual and linguistic devices employed in their posts? How can we conceive of their contribution to fashion communication? What kinds of selves are made visible and what is obscured in such posts? These questions arose through the course of this research and were not sufficiently addressed by my other two main methodologies.

I read as wide a cross-section of blogs as I could, often clicking through the blogroll of blogs I already read to discover new ones. I made a habit of looking at every personal style blog I found mentioned in mainstream media news articles and profiles in fashion magazines as well as general readership photo-books on style blogs, so that I would discover as many as possible. I read blogs written from within cities and blogs kept from suburban bedrooms. I read blogs written

by college graduates that seemed to find overnight success thanks to coverage in mastheads like *The New York Times*—as was the case for Leandra Medine of *Man Repeller* (Aleksander 2010)—as well as blogs that seemed to only be read by a cluster of a blogger's close friends and 'blogfriends' (Meder 2012).

However, I did limit the blogs I closely studied in two significant ways: I chose to focus primarily on blogs written in English by girls and young women, given that they constitute the majority of the style blogosphere. Interestingly, while there are a number of style blogs written by men, the tone of much of the criticism style blogs attract is historically consistent with critiques made more generally of women's contributions to public discourse: too personal, irrelevant, immature, and unseemly. This parallel guided my focus, as did my interest in the significance of this widespread and influential emergence of public texts written by girls and young women.

The sheer number of style blogs from around the world that are written in English, as well as the influence many early English-speaking bloggers had on the development of the practice, led me to the conclusion that such a focus would be representative of the overall shape and dynamics of the style blogosphere. In fact, studies that have been conducted thus far on blogs written in languages other than English and those blogging from outside the West (such as Palmgren 2010 on Scandinavian style blogs and Luvaas 2013 on Indonesian style blogs) have demonstrated that the characteristics of style blogs are remarkably consistent throughout the blogosphere regardless of the cultural specificities of these blogs. Nevertheless, I read as widely as I could, following blogs from the USA, Canada,

the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Sweden, Australia, India, and the Philippines, written by women and girls writing from vastly different subject positions.

At the time of writing, Luvaas's article is the only theoretical work on fashion blogging outside of the developed world to have been published. It is important to acknowledge the work of style bloggers writing from the margins of an already marginalised sub-genre of the blogosphere, and yet unfortunately it is beyond the capacities of this study to contribute in a substantive way to such a discussion. In writing an overview of the practice with a focus on its implications on communications and the performativity of fashion and identity, I have focused on the similarities between different sub-genres and localities of blogging rather than the specificities and cultural implications of localised practices. Nonetheless, further studies on style blogs written in languages other than English are needed to more fully interrogate this practice and to consider the work of style bloggers in areas such as mainland China, who are prolific and whose practice has not yet been approached by researchers. Such studies would usefully broaden our understanding of this phenomenon, and I hope that my work will elucidate aspects of style blogging that can be challenged, nuanced, or extended by subsequent studies.

*The problem of subjectivity*

Even with my varied and prolonged reading, I was drawn to particular blogs more than others based on my personal preferences, as is consistent with readership in general of this sub-genre (see Chapter Three). Being founded as they are on the personalities and perspectives of individuals, the reasons for

readers to follow the blogs they do are often subjective and informed by personal taste and interests. In the course of my research I found, as did Viviane Serfaty before me, that 'some [texts] acquired more presence and character than others', and that the subjective aspect of reading could not be extracted from my choice of material to focus on (2004: 16). However, like Serfaty, I always looked to the characteristics that were shared between blogs, using particular case studies to demonstrate wider patterns at work in the style blogosphere.

Of course, as Serfaty acknowledges, there is no such thing as objective observation (2004: 18): that my work is influenced by my own subjectivity does not entail that it lacks rigour. The object of study here is an entity with permeable boundaries, one that has required a careful consideration of how to make meaning while allowing for its inherent complexities and the many voices that constitute it. If, as Serfaty argues, 'distortion is the very condition any researcher has to labor under' (2004: 18) then perhaps all that can be done is acknowledge one's personal relation to the subject and attempt to counteract these through the employment of multiple methodological approaches.

Having outlined my approach and the work of other researchers that has informed and spurred my own, I will now delve into the social and textual origins of the style blogosphere. Many of the characteristics and developments of style blogging have emerged and consolidated based upon media that preceded such blogs and the work of early fashion bloggers who paved the way for those

who followed them onto the blogosphere. It is this historical precedent which

shaped the contemporary style blogosphere, and to which I now turn.