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ABSTRACT

Using actor-network theory (ANT), this study shows how once-amateurish, ordinary fashion consumers, who have no fashion education, professional background, and family credentials reach a remarkable number of audience and make a career out of their personal consumption. Examining semi-structured in-depth interviews with the most popular fashion bloggers in Turkey, we investigate how a hobby can become someone's occupation. Our findings show that economic and social rewards are the primary rationale to start blogging as a profession. By focusing on the practice of fashion blogging as an occupation through ANT, we make contributions to consumer behavior literature by laying out the dynamics behind the blogging network, identifying critical human and non-human actors and their relations in the network, giving insights about a growing consumer-generated market.

Keywords: Fashion blogging, actor-network theory, consumer-generated market, web 2.0, blogosphere

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MODA BLOGLARI İLE KARİYER YAPMAK

ÖZ

Bu alıřma, Aktör-Ağ Teorisini kullanarak, moda eğitimi almamıř ve moda sektöründe deneyimi olmayan sıradan tüketicilerin tüketim alışkanlıklarından yola çıkarak moda blogculuğunu nasıl bir meslek haline getirdiklerini göstermektedir. Türkiye'nin en ünlü moda blogcuları ile yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine mülakatlar yapılarak bir hobinin mesleğe dönüşümü incelenmiştir. Bulgular, ekonomik ve sosyal kazanımların moda blogculuğunu bir meslek haline getirmekte etken olduğunu göstermektedir. Blog yazarlığının arkasında yatan dinamikler araştırılırken, ağ meydana getiren insan ve insan dışı aktörler belirlenmiş ve aktörler arasındaki ilişkiler incelenerek tüketici davranışları yazınına katkı sağlanmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, alıřma, büyümekte olan tüketici kaynaklı bir pazara ışık tutmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Moda blogları, aktör-ağ teorisi, tüketici kaynaklı pazarlar, web 2.0, blogosphere

1. Introduction

“Many men, as well as women, have made not simply a career but a life work out of being fashion addicts.” (Wilson, 2000)

Web 2.0 technologies increased the connection, interaction and collaboration chance with consumers by offering user-generated platforms that create engagement (Mount and Martinez, 2014). Blog, one of the most popular Web 2.0 applications (Chau and Xu, 2012), offer a self-expression platform on the Internet with unlimited space (Kozinets, 2006). Although the primary rationale of blogs is sharing self-reflections (Belk, 2013), research revealed that bloggers are doing something more than “sharing” by generating publicly available content to strangers (Giesler, 2006). A study by Rocamora (2011, 2012) shows that fashion blogs became a key player and a critical platform for the circulation of fashion-related content and help lay people to own their business. For instance, the 27 years old Italian personal style blogger Chiara Ferragni’s blog, The Blonde Salad (theblondesalad.com), attract a huge number of followers, giving the personal-style blogger an opportunity to establish an incredibly lucrative business. She launched her shoe line Chiara Ferragni in 2010 (Stankeviciute, 2013) and she made \$8 million in revenues in 2015, with 70% coming from her shoe business and the rest coming from collaborations with brands and blogging (The Forbes, 2015). Also, fashion blogger Danielle Bernstein owner of We Wore What charges from \$5,000 to \$15,000 for one sponsored Instagram post (Sowray, 2015).

In the context of fashion blogging, we elaborate how a hobby can become someone’s occupation. More specifically, this paper aims to explore the dynamics that enable ordinary fashion consumers, who have no fashion education, professional background and family credentials (Turner, 2010) to build a sizable audience for their blogs. No prior research in marketing literature has investigated fashion blogging as a network. Accordingly, we use Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that enabled us to identify each actor in the fashion blogging network, their roles and relations. By doing so, we show the main motivations to start blogging as a profession and the related economic and social rewards. We start our discussion by first looking at the literature on the main work related to fashion blogging. Then, we show the methodology by explaining how the data collection and analysis were carried out. Finally, we present the preliminary findings of our study.

2. Literature Review

Previous research defined blog as a weblog that publishes the blogger’s thoughts and opinions as entries and posts with links, images, and audio content in a

journal-like manner in reverse chronological order (Sepp *et al.*, 2011; Yang, 2006). Fashion blogs, which aim to present fashion style and preferences of an ordinary person became popular as a particular genre in the late 1990s with the spread of various types of blogs (Engholm and Hansen-Hansen, 2014; Lovink, 2007). The production and consumption of fashion discourse have changed (Camiciottoli, 2015) when fashion-conscious consumers started to seek more than just buying clothes and look for fashion knowledge, insights, and recommendations (Morandin *et al.*, 2013). The blogosphere became the number one place for inspiration (Cheng and Fang, 2015) after bloggers started to use their power to inform readers about tastes and preferences (Casteleyn *et al.*, 2009), as well as spread product information (Bhagat *et al.*, 2009). Fashion consumers became aware of the paid celebrity endorsements and enticed by the unbiased suggestions of reachable non-professionals (Hanssen and Nitzsche, 2010; Stankeviciute, 2013; Kozinets, 1999; Armstrong and McAdams, 2009).

Several studies in various disciplines have examined fashion blogging. For instance, consumer researchers, McQuarrie *et al.* (2013), explained how ordinary consumers built a sizeable audience based on Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) while Atik and Cam (2015) investigated fashion blogs as virtual communities. In psychology, Lunde (2013) studied the influence of fashion blog reading on body image while, in sociology, Rocamora (2011, 2012) discussed the impact of new technologies on the rise of fashion blogosphere and examined identity construction through fashion blogs. Also, marketing scholars, Sepp *et al.* (2011) explored the motivations of private bloggers to produce content by using 'uses and gratifications theory,' while in an anthropologist perspective Nardi *et al.* (2004) investigated the reasons behind people's motivation to blog such as documenting one's life, expressing thoughts and feelings, forming community forums, providing comments and opinions, and thinking by writing.

Furthermore, multiple studies defined the phenomenon. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) called electronic word-of-mouth and described bloggers as opinion leaders. Turner (2010) labeled as "demotic turn", which is an opportunity for ordinary people to appear in media. McQuarrie *et al.* (2013: 137) defined the phenomena as megaphone effect, which "occurs when ordinary consumers post to the web about consumption and acquire a mass audience for these posts." However, exploring the practice of fashion blogging as an occupation and investigating how these amateur consumers exercise influence over others' buying behavior is an understudied area. No prior research has examined the success of fashion blogs by identifying critical actors, their roles and relations in the network. Human and non-human actors as well as their links to each other and their associations to the network are important areas of consideration according to the Actor Network Theory (ANT). Filling this gap we aim to fortify Latour's (2005) argument that human actors (e.g. consumers, bloggers, followers) and non-human actors, (e.g. the Internet,

blogosphere, smartphone apps) are equally important and in the foreground in a consumer-generated market.

We employ ANT perspective, which is an effective mean to understand the increasingly complex sociotechnical situations (Sarker *et al.*, 2006) as suggested by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987). “Crucial to ANT, the movements being tracked via networks are not performed by human actors alone” (Bajde, 2013: 229), which means that all participants, people or technologies are referred as actors and have equal importance in any given situation (Latour, 2005). An actant is a network, which includes any actors such as cell phones, blogs, people, digital images, social software Web sites, friends or relatives of participants, friend-of-a-friend (FOAF), social software participants, and outlier participants who are active in creating and sharing information (Potts, 2009). Despite some limitations, an ANT based approach is useful to understand the role of technology that shapes complex social processes and to explore how parts of a network form a whole network and stability (Cresswell *et al.*, 2010). The aim of this paper to employ ANT approach is to investigate and gather detailed insights into how power come into being in this network and in turn financial and social rewards gained. Using ANT perspective enabled us to identify each actor, to explore when, why and how actors participated in the network, to understand how bloggers create information from their consumption patterns and meet needs of fashion consumers, and to discuss the contributions of each actor in the creation of consumer-generated market by hobbyist fashion bloggers.

3. Methodology

Carson *et al.* (2001) argue that qualitative research offers the chance to explore the reasons behind human actions, and Cherrier and Murray (2007) propose that descriptive details require collecting consumer narratives. Therefore, since this research aims to reveal an in-depth understanding of the dynamics behind how a hobby can become someone’s occupation, an empirical study using qualitative research methods was suitable. Data collection began with searching the most popular bloggers in Turkey by examining their global rankings from Alexa.com. E-mails were sent to top 100 bloggers. Twenty-five replies were received, three of which rejected to join this research. Up to date, 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with Turkish bloggers whose ages ranged from 25 to 37 with a diverse background in education and occupation. Interviews were undertaken in 2015 in Istanbul and Izmir, which are the first and third largest cities in Turkey, respectively. Table 1 below summarizes the profile of the participants.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Name	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation	# Instagram followers*
Fulya	27	Female	Graduate Student	Blogger + Instashop	32,100
Esra	28	Female	University Graduate	Owner of a Coffee Shop + Blogger	60,900
Bilge	25	Female	University Graduate	Blogger + Instashop	42,200
Aslı	30	Female	University Graduate	Blogger + Instashop	2266
Tuğba	28	Female	PhD Student	Blogger + Instashop	5098
Ayşe	28	Female	University Graduate	Dentist + Blogger	15,500
Burcu	33	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	6177
Zeynep	28	Female	University Graduate	Biochemist + Blogger	18,300
Ali	20	Male	University Student	Full-time Blogger	10,400
Fatma	27	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	8972
Gül	32	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	47,400
Buse	37	Female	PhD Graduate	Part-time academician + Full-time Blogger	52,300
Umut	27	Male	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger + Capsule Collection	77,400
Ferda	35	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	97,000
Melisa	27	Female	University Graduate	Lecturer + Blogger	92,900
Mine	27	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger + Designer	128,000
Didem	32	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	105,000
Merve	28	Female	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	80,100
Mert	25	Male	University Graduate	Full-time Blogger	19,400

*Number of Instagram followers as of December 25, 2015

Interviews lasted between 50 to 120 minutes based on a pre-designed interview protocol parallel to our research question including open-ended probing questions as suggested by Mason (2002). Open-ended questions allowed digging out the phenomena under study in more detail. To enhance the quality of the research iterative techniques were used throughout the interview (Kvale, 1996). Each interview was tape-recorded for accuracy with the informed consent of each participant (Glesne, 1999) and transcribed verbatim, word for word (and sound for sound) as recorded on tape. To explore and understand the importance of non-human actors in blogger-follower network, projective techniques such as reviewing informant's blog and social media posts were also used. In addition to textual data, relevant visual data such as posts of interviewed fashion bloggers were checked one-by-one and incorporated into our interpretations. Following interviewee blogs, Instagram pages, Snap Chat accounts, Youtube channels, monitoring digital conversations with followers (e.g. comments under posts, Snapchat dialogues,

etc.) and following blogger events for over one year enabled us to understand informants' perspectives better and helped us to gather representative insights about non-human actors. Barthes (1977) showed the direct relationship between the images and the content of its message. Therefore, content analysis of digital images posted by fashion bloggers enabled us to understand the denoted message and connoted meaning.

The results were analyzed thematically. We had to become thoroughly familiar with the data set to form a thematic framework of the main themes relevant to phenomena under investigation (Ritchie *et. al.*, 2003). Guideline provided by Spiggle (1994) for data analysis and interpretation was followed during the analysis phase. We examined all transcripts by using open coding to identify the central concepts, which arise from the interviews, and to compare similarities and differences (Larossa, 2005). Seventeen hours of taped data, which lead to 521 pages of transcript, were examined one by one using open coding. Then, we grouped these concepts with selectively coding to create core categories as suggested by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009).

Pooled data enabled us to discover recurrent themes, identify both patterns and irregularities and helped us to organize a large amount of raw text to present our findings (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Using each human and non-human actor that is generated from the data, we mapped the actors, relationships, and processes to understand better the system that leads to success, to define the roles of each actor in the network and to identify the relations between each other (See Figure 1). Mapping allowed us to see an overall picture of the network and actors in the system. We carried out constant checks with the transcripts, codes, our self-reflectivity, and theory aiming for validity and credibility in findings as suggested by Creswell (1998). Data collection continues with more interviews with the consumers of the fashion blogs, fashion designers and fashion marketers of the corporation who work with fashion bloggers to better address our research question.

4. Preliminary Findings

In accordance with the Actor-Network Theory, our study showed that followers, friends & family, other bloggers, photographers, brand specialists, magazine editors, designers, advertisers, interns, managers, other writers, make-up and hair artists are the human actors while fashion items, the Internet, computers, mobile devices, blogosphere, social media, instant texting applications, professional cameras, digital images, short videos and editing tools are the non-human actors of the 'fashion blogging network.' The relation of human and non-human actors that is revealed from our research is illustrated with an informant's quote and Figure 1 below.

“If there weren’t demanding consumers who later became followers, there wouldn’t be a need to create blog content and share inspirational pictures. If there weren’t smartphones, bloggers wouldn’t be active in social networking applications and update their profile every few hours, which in turn would have a dramatic impact on the business. Also, if there weren’t social networking tools, bloggers couldn’t have attracted their audience just by writing a blog and of course if there weren’t the Internet the whole blogosphere wouldn’t be there. Thus there wouldn’t be the business of blogging (Fulya, 27, Female).”

Bloggers see themselves as the opinion leaders who are at the center of this network and have an impact on the purchase decisions of others while benefiting from all other actors in play. Each actor is important in this network to create a coherent whole system. Fulya believes that all actors have an equal role in the success of network and if one actor leaves, the entire network would be affected. As Callon (1999) argued, each actor, regardless if it is a human or non-human actor, is connected to several others with bi-directional relationships. Figure 1 below represents the existing system of how fashion blogging turns to be a profession.

As it is shown in Figure 1, at the center of the network, there is an ordinary person, ‘blogger’ who is interested in fashion and aware of the free opportunities in technology to spread her voice and launches a blog. At first, bloggers start taking pictures of themselves wearing clothing from their closet in different occasions and publish these photos on their blogs. In this stage, their friends or family members (husband, wife, and sister) are their followers, supporters and also their photographers, who spend a whole day taking pictures to catch the perfect angle. Once clicks and likes they receive increase, they become more passionate and serious about their blogs.

“It is important to take professional pictures. Followers evaluate you according to your posts. If you post pictures with bright colors, taken from good angles showing all the details in an excellent resolution, they keep following your page. At first, I didn’t have enough money to hire a photographer or to buy a professional camera. That’s why I borrowed my friend’s camera. My partner was helping me. He was taking my pictures. I learned how to take good pictures. I also learned how to record a professional tutorial video. I had to do the editing by myself. So, I learned how to use photo and video editing tools. All these learning processes need dedication, patience and time. Now I am working with a professional team. I hired a professional photographer. I also have a studio in my house. I record my YouTube videos there. And I have a walking closet, which is a whole room (laughing) (Umut, 27, male).”

Therefore, working with a professional photographer rather than asking friends or family to take pictures is a must to turn blogging into a profession. Bloggers cooperate with a photographer to shoot different outfits for a few hours every single

day. Some bloggers follow the do-it-yourself route and take all of the photos by themselves with the help of a tripod. Our participants highlighted the importance of consistency. Attaching at least two pictures for each post on social media every day and at least two posts a week on a blog is a must to generate more traffic. To create different contents, new, stylish, luxurious clothing, accessories, smartphones, mobile devices (e.g. tablets, smart watches) and social media come into play in this phase. The vital part of running a successful blog is to spread the word.

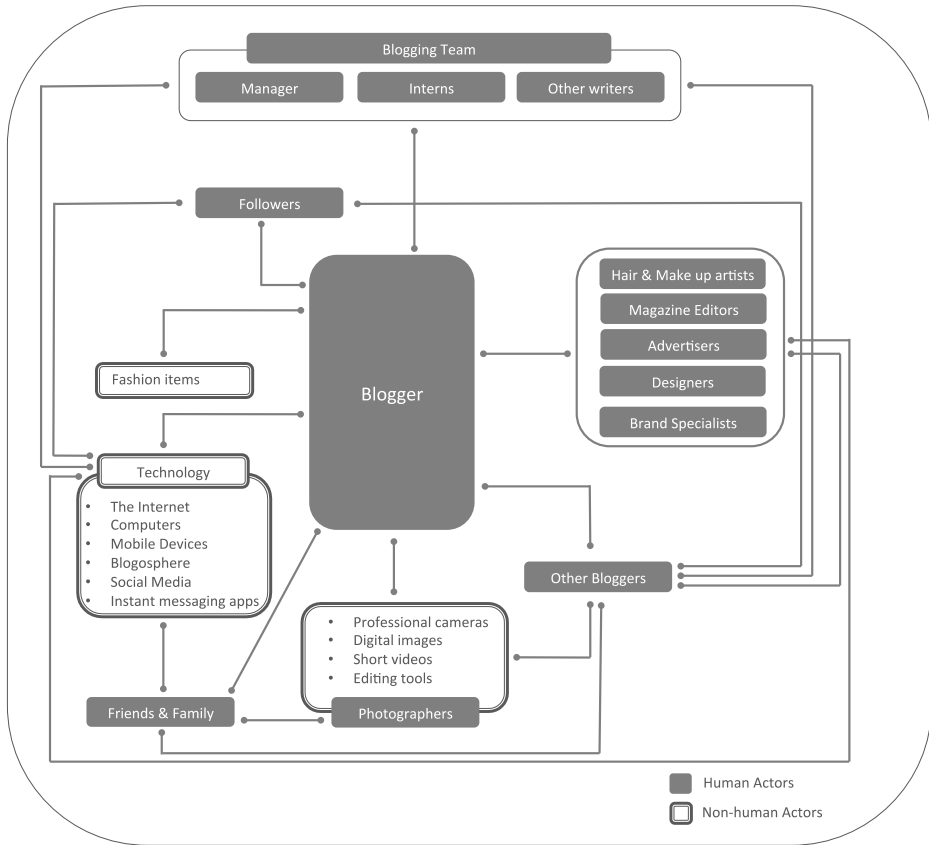


Figure 1. The Relation of Human and Non-Human Actors

The second step to have a profession in fashion blogging is to get social media accounts to help to promote the blog, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter. These social networking tools can be synced with the blog and send updates to the followers when a new blog post is added. All bloggers mentioned the importance to be quirky and fun and to have a unique fashion angle to entice people and thus be realized by the industry. Feeding other social networking tools, such as Instagram, Youtube, and Snapchat according to their unique content along with blogs needed more dedication, commitment, time and a lot of hard work while helping to reach a mass audience as an amateur and transformed a hobby to an occupation.

Building relationships with fellow bloggers help to thrive the business. It is also important to interact with other bloggers' followers as well because if your style is similar to a particular fashion blog, the chance of its readers to follow your blog is high. When bloggers are novice being invited to a blogger event is the third step to be socially recognized. When posts from a blogging event fall into social media with tagged names, the follower numbers of bloggers increase. Bloggers are aware of the importance of follower numbers on social media accounts in order to be chosen as a brand ambassador. Our informants mentioned that follow number is a sign of popularity and the number of likes and comments is an indicator of quality and effectiveness to reach a mass audience. That's why bloggers socialize with their followers, and they take into account feedbacks and inquiries. Bloggers' credibility and influence as an opinion leader result from their stance to followers (Sepp *et al.*, 2011). They explain their success by sincerity, honesty, and as Mohr (2013) revealed engaging experience with followers.

Supporting McQuarrie *et al.* (2013), as fashion bloggers gained a remarkable audience; they started to gain social and economic rewards. Looking at these dimensions, with these preliminary findings, we lay out the different relationships between the various actors in the network.

4.1. Economic Rewards

After fashion bloggers became opinion leaders and trendsetters, the fashion industry representatives are forced to recognize these new generational influencers by encouraging consumer-to-consumer (C2C) electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) with rewards such as free products and services, vouchers, and discounts. Other economic rewards come from teaming up with brands for paid ad replacement on blogs, brand-sponsored blog and social media contents, gifts from brands, paid event attendance, collaborations with brands and affiliated links to websites like RewardStyle and ShopStyle for sale commissions. Also, creating capsule collections for well-known brands, launching their clothing lines, acting in TV commercials, brand-sponsored vacations in different countries to develop unique and appealing content, having their own fashion column in a magazine or newspapers, and landing on the cover of fashion magazines are other means of economic rewards. Also, beauty salons serve bloggers for free in change for a post checked in their salons, influential bloggers get paid to be a guest speaker at seminars, they give paid online classes or one-on-one sessions to teach social media skills and photography.

“I have a team who help me in my office. I don't work from home because it feels more professional when we have a place to go every day. I hired a full-time photographer who makes my shooting program, edits my pictures and prepare creative content. In my team, I also have two writers. One of them writes about

travel and, the other one writes fashion news from all around the world. We try to be different. I am not just a fashion blogger. I am a lifestyle blogger. And you met Melis. She is my intern. She goes everywhere with me. She takes notes in the meetings. She learns about blogging by experiencing it. I am also designing basic t-shirts. I have my t-shirt e-commerce company (Mine, 27, female).”

Being treated as celebrities open new doors for economic rewards such as selling used clothing as “Blogger’s Closet” on Instagram and blog or developing e-commerce sites. Once bloggers start an official business with their name, they become the face of the company. They hire full-time professionals to work with them. They hire other writers to edit their posts and sometimes to create different contents (e.g. food, lifestyle, travel sections) for the blog. Bloggers also start to work with a manager who arranges brand collaborations, event schedules, and financial reports. Mine (27, female) has an intern who is a university student in media relations department. They came to the coffee shop, where we did the interview together. The intern mentioned that working with a blogger helps her to understand how to use different media in a coherent and efficient way. Like Mine, some bloggers rent an office space to work with their full-time blogging team. Therefore, while gaining economic rewards with blogging also bloggers create professional jobs for others. For example, while fashion blogging transforms into a profitable business and profession, fashion blogging photography does so as well.

4.2. Social Rewards

Once bloggers have a significant number of followers and receive a remarkable amount of likes and comments, they are treated as fashion celebrities. Informants stated that they began to share their style preferences and styles in their personal blogs because of an insatiable desire for gaining appraisal, thus feeling good about themselves and their appearance. Interestingly, some bloggers are so popular with their fashion taste that their fans created fan pages. The admiration and appreciation of fashion taste raise bloggers confidence and self-esteem while building recognition as a fashion authority.

Social rewards are linked to prestige, power, popularity and more free time to socialize. After reaching a significant number of followers, fashion companies make collaborations with bloggers as brand ambassadors by inviting them to their events and treating them as fashion authorities. Attending to these events and being mentioned in media as a fashion expert bring a higher social position. Together with the economic rewards the way they dress, the places they go, their preferences, their network of people and their lifestyle improves. Prestige and power come along with the popularity.

“My daughter is four years old. When I work full time in a company, I don’t have enough time to spend with my daughter. I miss her. One day, while I was reading a blog post, I decided to start my blog. I was always interested in fashion. I was shopping clothes a lot. I asked my husband about my ideas, and he supported me. He helped me to take pictures. I was so happy to be in the fashion industry somehow and arrange my work schedule. I had more personal time to spend with my friends and family. Blogging allows me to work from home, coffee shop or on vacation while making more money. I love it (Didem, 32, female).”

While some bloggers carry on their business full-time, some of them work part-time in addition to their daytime jobs to supplement their income. Despite how fabulous a blogger’s life is seen from outside, all bloggers agree that it needs a lot of work to remain on the agenda. Nonetheless, bloggers prefer to do the hard work and to have the chance to organize their timesheet. They choose to blog as a career because it allows them to have leisure time with their family and beloved ones. Also, blogging encourages these people to wear whatever they want to wear, different than everyone else, without waiting for an occasion.

5. Conclusion

As new types of online business models developed and the number of demanding and digitalized consumers increased, the fashion industry started going through a transformation. Postings of consumers have become more credible than those of the marketing professionals. Therefore, fashion bloggers began to blog for their new career. The popularity of blogosphere provided the opportunity to start a full-time career in fashion industry and enabled an excellent marketing tool for brands in the fashion industry.

In this study, fashion blogging is examined as an occupation. Our findings show that economic rewards such as free fashion items, vouchers, and discounts given by fashion brands and social rewards like receiving invitations to fashion shows, being mentioned in the media and being treated like fashion celebrities are primary motivations to start blogging as a career. Besides our main aim to understand how ordinary fashion consumers turn their hobby into a full-time career, our findings also present significant insights about each actor in the network and the strategies of bloggers, which is essential for the success of fashion marketers. By using the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), we make contributions to marketing literature, shedding light to the dynamics behind the fashion blogging network, identifying critical human and non-human actors and their relations in the network. We also provide insights about a growing consumer-generated market.

We believe that this study has the potential to enrich academic conversations while creating awareness about this new profession and guiding marketing professionals

to collaborate with or hire independent fashion bloggers to produce content and to bring life to their corporate online blogs. Our study is limited to the empirical investigation of mainly fashion bloggers and their perspectives on the fashion blogging network. More insights can be gained by conducting further interviews with their followers or their sponsoring fashion companies. Our findings are still preliminary since this is an ongoing research. The dynamics behind being a full-time fashion blogger, the capitals and strategies needed to become a famous and dominant blogger in the industry, and the importance, role and relation of each actor to create a successful network can be further investigated. A comparative analysis to understand if fashion blogging is worldwide recognized and how fashion bloggers in different countries see their role in the fashion industry can also be further studied. Finally, but not lastly, future research about how followers evaluate and consume the personal style blogs and how social status matters in consuming blogs could make great contributions to the research presented here.

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