

The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging

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The megaphone effect refers to the fact that the web makes a mass audience potentially available to ordinary consumers. The article focuses on fashion bloggers who acquire an audience by iterated displays of aesthetic discrimination applied to the selection and combination of clothing. The authors offer a theoretical account of bloggers' success in terms of the accumulation of cultural capital via public displays of taste and describe how the exercise of taste produces economic rewards and social capital for these bloggers. The article situates fashion blogging as one instance of a larger phenomenon that includes online reviews and user-generated content and extends to the consumption of food and home decor as well as clothing. In these instances of the megaphone effect, a select few ordinary consumers are able to acquire an audience without the institutional mediation historically required.

A new kind of consumer behavior has emerged online in the past decade. The web has made it possible for ordinary consumers to reach a mass audience, to “grab hold of the megaphone,” to adapt Bourdieu’s (1999) metaphor. More consumers now have more opportunities to reach thousands of other consumers than ever before. This novel phenomenon has not yet received much theoretical attention. We draw on Turner’s (2010) idea of a “demotic turn” in contemporary culture to situate blogs and other means whereby ordinary consumers take hold of the megaphone, and then we develop Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital to explain the processes whereby a select few ordinary consumers acquire a mass audience.

THE MEGAPHONE

Fashion blogs are an example of the web phenomenon to be explained. Among the first fashion bloggers to grab the megaphone was a 13-year-old girl (Rosman 2009); by 2010 this blogger had been profiled in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Guardian*, and other publications, and her blog posts were read by tens of thousands. This blogger got hold of the megaphone by means of her actions—not by birth or through institutional position. We document 10 other fashion bloggers, ordinary consumers all, who built a sizable audience for their blogs, and we argue that a theory of cultural capital, revised and updated to reflect possibilities inherent in online consumer behavior, can provide an explanation for their success.

The phenomenon is not limited to the fashion context or blogging. *Chocolate and Zucchini* is a food blog whose author was not trained as a chef and did not work for a food magazine before starting the blog; she was employed in the computer field. Her posts may receive over 100,000 views. *Tight Ass Little Apartment* is a blog about interior design and home decoration. This blogger was not trained in design or employed as a designer before starting the blog. Setting blogging aside, Yelp.com, a site that hosts reviews of local businesses, each year deems some of its most active reviewers to be Yelp Elite. A multiyear member of the Elite may post hundreds of restaurant reviews, receive thousands of compliments, and be read by tens of thousands, without ever having owned a restaurant, worked for a food publi-

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cation, or been a chef; these online reviewers have got hold of the megaphone. Likewise, “user generated content” on YouTube and elsewhere, such as haul videos (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2011), provides ordinary consumers opportunities to grab the megaphone (Burgess and Green 2009; Snickers and Vonderau 2009).

However, blogs need not concern consumption, and online behavior consists of much else apart from consumers grabbing hold of the megaphone: social media, content that goes viral, avatars in virtual worlds, and so forth all represent phenomena beyond the remit of this article (Boellstorff 2010; Jenkins 2006; Miller 2011). The megaphone effect, as treated here, is specific: it occurs when ordinary consumers, defined as individuals lacking professional experience and not holding an institutional or family position, post to the web about consumption and acquire a mass audience for these posts.

All of the examples given represent consumer behavior. The blog posts, reviews, and user-generated content of interest are primarily concerned with consumption objects: fashion, food, home decor. Consumer bloggers achieve an audience that historically was only available to institutionally located professionals (McCracken 1986), but they achieve this audience by means of publicly consuming: choosing, evaluating, and engaging with clothing (in our focal example) and posting accounts of this consumption that garner a large audience of strangers.

This new consumer phenomenon, made possible by the web, is not well explained by existing theory. During the period studied, anyone who wished to share thoughts with others could do so on Facebook or other social media sites. Hence, when an individual chooses instead to generate content for a mass audience of strangers, the phenomenon is not readily understood as sharing (Belk 2010; Giesler 2006). Moreover, the fashion bloggers studied generally do not display clothes they sewed by hand but mass-marketed, branded goods; likewise, food bloggers do not only show meals cooked from scratch, and online reviewers do not only write about craft breweries and artisan bakeries. Hence, the phenomenon cannot readily be understood as prosumption (Campbell 2005). One could label the phenomenon electronic word of mouth and call these bloggers opinion leaders or market mavens (Feick and Price 1987; Kozinets et al. 2010), but this obscures what is new and different about their consumer behavior: ongoing communication by ordinary consumers to a mass audience of strangers.

Turner (2010) provides a conceptual framework that situates the megaphone effect within a larger cultural movement that he terms the “demotic turn,” which embraces such phenomena as talk radio and reality television (Rose and Wood 2005), in addition to various forms of online behavior. The demotic turn is defined as an increase in opportunities for ordinary people to appear in the media. Normally only media professionals, other occupants of powerful institutional positions (e.g., government officials or business leaders), and designated celebrities appear on television or otherwise gain a mass audience. Moreover, celebrities became

that way by prior successful performances in a credentialed institutional setting (entertainment, sports, etc.). Until very recently, ordinary individuals lacked access to the mass media and could only gain that access by successful performances in specified institutional settings—however extraordinary their individual motivation or skill.

These restrictions began to loosen with the spread of reality television. Here the media began to create celebrities, rather than mediate between existing celebrities and the mass audience. Turner (2010) notes, however, that the celebrity gained by successful reality television participants is not gained by their independent action or even owned by them (his discussion of exploitative contract terms is bracing). Reality television celebrity thus remains an institutionally mediated phenomenon in which the owners of mass media determine which ordinary citizens are to be granted access to an audience.

What distinguishes the megaphone phenomenon within the larger context of Turner’s demotic turn is that in certain consumption spheres, consumers are able to grab the megaphone for themselves, without institutional certification or enablement. Unlike reality television participants, a successful blogger gains her audience directly, by blogging in such a way that large numbers of other consumers begin to follow her posts. Once a consumer gains a large audience, this can be converted into institutional access and further leveraged thereby, but prior institutional mediation is no longer required for audience access.

However, not every blogger succeeds in gaining an audience (Lovink 2008). What has to be theorized is the process that allows a small number of fashion bloggers to realize the newfound possibility of building a mass audience for an ordinary individual’s acts of consumption. We offer a sociological explanation of this process that centers on taste judgments and the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1986), buttressed by an application of Goffman’s (1959) analysis of social action in terms of performance for an audience.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Although long familiar to consumer researchers (Holt 1998), the concept of cultural capital has not previously been applied to the dynamic acquisition of audiences now seen on the web. Our adaptation of Bourdieu’s ideas reflects an evolution in his thinking and is based on his less familiar later work (1998, 1999, 2008). This evolution can best be grasped by returning to his original formulation of cultural capital and articulating the criticisms that led Bourdieu to evolve it.

Origins of Cultural Capital

Bourdieu developed the idea of cultural capital “in the early sixties to account for the fact that, after controlling for economic position and social origin, students from more cultured families not only have higher rates of academic success but exhibit different modes and patterns of cultural

consumption and expression in a wide gamut of domains” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 160). The original context of this work was Parisian society 50 years ago. To illustrate, let Alain and Jean attend the same preparatory school. Let their family income and fathers’ level of educational attainment be the same, and assume each grows up in a large apartment in a good neighborhood. In terms of conventional indicators, Alain and Jean would be on a par with respect to socioeconomic position. Bourdieu’s contribution was to note the potential significance of one key difference: suppose further that Alain grew up surrounded by paintings and sculpture and had a piano in the house, on which he had to learn to play classical pieces, while in Jean’s case, money was spent on furnishings and high-end appliances, and the music heard was popular songs on a phonograph.

Bourdieu’s thesis was that Alain would grow up endowed with a greater amount of cultural capital and that this difference in cultural capital would give Alain an advantage over Jean in multiple social contexts. Because of the centrality of aesthetic judgment in the French elite schools of that era (Bourdieu 1996), his endowment would lead to better performance in prep school for Alain and a head start for Alain in acquiring a high socioeconomic position for himself. Specifically, Alain’s trajectory would be enhanced by his capacity to exercise the sort of taste in cultural activities expected and respected among fellow Parisians who already held a high socioeconomic position.

Here Bourdieu’s thinking can be illuminated by Goffman’s (1951) earlier account, which emphasizes the potential for faking and the need to police wishful or fraudulent claims to a high status. Taste judgments in the aesthetic realm, in the Paris of that era, served as what Goffman terms a “restrictive practice” (301). Only individuals surrounded by objects of high culture from birth and engaged early on in cultural production, such as piano playing, were likely to succeed in making the kind of aesthetic judgments required to be accepted into high social position. Cultural capital was obtained from the family and was manifest both in level of taste (better vs. worse) and in particular tastes (for certain kinds of cultural productions).

An objection raised early in the diffusion of Bourdieu’s ideas was that cultural capital might be meaningful only within a rare kind of milieu, such as Parisian society of that era (Lamont 1992). Evidence was not long in coming that American schools did not reward familiarity with high culture or art objects in the same way, nor did cultural knowledge appear to be so crucial to social preferment in American or British contexts (Halle 1993; Lamont 1992; see Goldthorpe [2007] and Silva and Warde [2010] for British accounts).

For consumer researchers, this critique of the insularity of cultural capital was checked by Holt (1998), whose contribution was to detach cultural capital from high culture and art objects in general. Holt focused not on differences in what objects were owned but on how consumers with different social backgrounds would consume the same product categories differently, in accordance with their differing

amounts of cultural capital. Holt’s examination of consumption based on social position was subsequently followed by Berger and Ward (2010), Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose (2005), Henry (2005), and Üstüner and Holt (2010).

A key problem with Bourdieu’s initial conceptualization of cultural capital is captured in his term “habitus,” which reflects dispositions instilled from birth in the course of growing up in a particular kind of family occupying a specific social position. What is explained by habitus is not so much different levels of cultural capital, as the word “capital” is conventionally used, but differences in cultural endowment. Alain obtains his cultural resources through his family, while Jean is sunk from the start—he was born into the wrong family. Conceptualized as an endowment, cultural capital becomes difficult to distinguish from “to the manner born”: a summary label for all the differences in taste and preference associated with higher versus lower social positions. In the present context this would imply that a woman who did not grow up surrounded by high fashion—who did not grow up wealthy, with access to haute couture, runway shows, designer brand clothing, and occasions to wear it—would lack the proper habitus to succeed as a fashion blogger. Under its original conception as a form of habitus, no ordinary consumer could possess or even acquire cultural capital, inasmuch as “ordinary,” consistent with Turner (2010), means not endowed with preexisting social position.

Field-Specific Capital

As Bourdieu’s ideas diffused and became subject to debate among sociologists, the criticism that jelled over time was not that cultural capital is limited to a specific social milieu or that it applies only in the case of objects of high culture; rather, as Gronow (1997) puts it, the difficulty with an endowment conception of cultural capital is that it presumes a static social arrangement (Lamont 1992). As an endowment, cultural capital explains reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977); it explains how social position is maintained, newcomers denied, and upward social mobility thwarted. In Gronow’s (1997) telling, that makes it peculiarly unsuited to explain contemporary Western society and, more particularly, the consumption of fashion—where change is of the essence (Davis 1992).

In response to criticisms of its static character (Schatzki 1996), Bourdieu’s thinking gradually evolved away from a reliance on the concept of habitus toward a reliance on field and a conception of field-specific capital (Swartz 1997). His thinking became less focused on social position within society as a whole and more concerned with how individuals maintained or advanced their position within specific fields. Bourdieu gradually ceased to speak of “cultural” capital or of any type of capital, replacing these with either “specific capital” or “[name of field] capital” (Bourdieu 1998, 1999, 2008).

The emerging and more dynamic conception of field-specific capital can be seen in this later account: “A capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field. . . . We can . . . compare a field to a game . . . [and] picture

each player having in front of her a pile of tokens of different colors, each color corresponding to a given species of capital. . . . Players can play to increase or conserve their capital. . . . A species of capital is what is efficacious in a given field, both as a weapon and as a stake of struggle, that which allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist . . . instead of being considered a negligible quantity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98–101). Here there emerges a conception of capital that could explain why some bloggers are able to grab the megaphone and acquire a mass audience: in the later Bourdieu, a consumer can put her tokens at risk to amass more. Capital can be invested and further accumulated, much in the same way as money can.

The key change that marks the later Bourdieu’s thinking is that field-specific capital can now be approached as both input and output: “as a weapon and as a stake of struggle.” This evolution has the effect of rejuvenating the money metaphor underlying references to “capital.” One of the factors that distinguish money from some other kinds of resources is that it can be invested to generate more of itself, with the amount of money returned a function of the risks taken. Cultural capital would then point to a resource, having to do with cultural matters and the aesthetic domain, that can be used as a weapon to win a struggle and also awarded as stakes to those winning that struggle.

We take this resource to be taste, understood in Gronow’s (1997) terms as judgment power. This definition highlights the connection between taste and aesthetic judgment and skill—an individual’s capacity to discriminate between the beautiful and graceful versus the labored and unappealing. Taste thus has levels, and individuals can be sorted in terms of how good their taste is—on their ability to discriminate stylish, fashionable clothing from merely acceptable dress. Cultural capital in the fashion field can now refer to the capacity to exercise taste in the sense of discrimination of aesthetic quality. But, consistent with the later Bourdieu’s dynamic formulation, cultural capital also refers to the stakes that may be gained from that exercise of taste. Fashion bloggers can be theorized as individuals who start with some capacity for taste and proceed to accumulate cultural capital from its repeated exercise and display.

FROM TASTE TO CAPITAL

It is important to acknowledge that a different conception of taste has dominated work in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Where Bourdieu (1984) and in particular Goffman (1951) emphasize taste level, work by Arsel and Bean (2013), Arsel and Thompson (2011), Holt (1998), and Thornton (1996) emphasizes taste preferences and taste communities or regimes. Thus, participants in Arsel and Thompson (2011) used taste preferences to protect their identity investments in the alternative music field, perceived as under a devaluing assault from a commercialized mythology of the hipster. Thornton (1996) similarly sees subcultural capital as a resource for authentication, which clubbers achieve by differentiating their taste

preferences from those of a despised (and fictive) mainstream. For these authors, taste preferences serve as a resource for drawing identity boundaries that include desired people and objects and exclude shunned or scorned others (Lamont 1992).

Note that taste is a contested notion subject to many more definitions than can be offered here (Gans 1999; Gronow 1997; Holt 1998; Johnston and Bauman 2010; Lynes 1955/1980). As Bayley (1991, xviii) puts it, “an academic history of taste is not so much difficult as impossible.” Hence, these two meanings of taste are not presented as exhaustive but simply as useful for situating this study relative to prior work.

Two Meanings of Taste

Following Holt (1998), taste in contemporary American consumption has been primarily treated as a means to affiliate with a group and to signal that identification. The focus has been on the formation of taste communities, rather than an individual’s exertion of taste leadership. As Arsel and Thompson (2011) put it, consumers learn to calibrate their tastes to a field, community, or group with which they identify—to join with others who share the same taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2013). Likewise in Holt (1998), members of the social elite find one another and recognize one another on the basis of their shared tastes (e.g., for movie directors), even as nonelite and elite members are repelled from one another by their differences in taste (regarding a \$22 couch purchase). This is taste as preference rather than taste as judgment power and aesthetic discrimination, as developed in Gronow (1997). It is the difference between taste as a device for affiliation and taste as a standard for discriminating the laudable from the pedestrian.

One reason that these two senses of taste have not been teased apart in past consumer research is that Bourdieu’s own work encompasses both meanings of taste, as seen in this oft-cited remark: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (1984, 6). As we read him, Bourdieu deliberately plays on the two meanings of “distinction,” here and throughout *Distinction*, making this word refer sometimes to difference and boundary, while at other times pointing to elevation and prestige. The double meaning of distinction corresponds to the double meaning of taste. Taste can be used to draw boundaries (Arsel and Bean 2013), as in “do you like what I like?” But taste can also function as a claim of and a denial of status, as in “he has a lot of taste . . . all of it bad” (Bayley 1991, 77).

To keep the two meanings straight, we will refer to distinction-between versus distinction-over. Taste as distinction-between draws boundaries, creates groups, and fosters solidarity. It is local in its operation and acts to cluster like-minded individuals and sequester them from others with different tastes. Taste as distinction-over asserts preferment, claims status for one above others, and sustains hierarchy. It operates at the societal level and can raise select individ-

uals to positions of prominence. Rather than grouping peers together into an Us apart from a Them, taste as distinction-over elevates select individuals over the mass.

Prior accounts in consumer research have successfully imported Bourdieu's account of taste aimed at distinction-between and developed how taste can be pressed into service as a boundary marker between groups, providing a basis for affiliation and community. The opportunity presented by online consumer behavior is the occasion it provides to look at taste in the service of distinction-over, taste as an agent of social mobility, taste as a resource for climbing a hierarchy. Our thesis is that it is this kind of taste that enables some fashion bloggers to grab the megaphone, and it is this sort of taste that they deploy to amplify its volume.

Goffman on Audiences

In principle, fashion bloggers could deploy taste in either its horizontal or its vertical sense. Clothing choice—taste as preference—can readily be used to identify the community or (sub)culture to which the wearer belongs: hipsters or clubbers or indie rockers (Elliott and Davies 2006; Goulding, Shankar, and Elliott 2002). Fashion blogs would then draw their audience from among consumers pursuing related identity projects, and the clothing and accessories most likely to be displayed on the blog would be those that send a strong signal about the particular community and subculture to which the blogger belongs (Berger and Ward 2010).

Goffman's (1959) work provides a basis for an alternative account of fashion blogging that emphasizes taste leadership rather than taste preference. Goffman applied a dramaturgical metaphor to everyday life, arguing that participants in social encounters could be parsed into actors and audience, with actors striving to put on a front and convey a certain persona, and audiences accepting successful actors seeming as they wish to be seen. In Goffman's account, no social actor is ever authentic in his or her behaviors toward an audience; authenticity, to the extent it is possible, is reserved for the private or intimate sphere. To an audience, one shows a persona, rather than revealing one's identity. Goffman (1959, 58) draws on Simone de Beauvoir for support: "the least sophisticated of women, once she is 'dressed,' does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like . . . the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there, that is, the character she represents, but is not."

Blogging, especially the visual self-presentations found in fashion blogging, can be theorized as the apotheosis of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor. Unlike in face-to-face interactions in everyday life, or conversing with known friends on Facebook, a fashion blogger gains the capacity to represent a persona that may be far removed from her "real" self, a persona she can rehearse and rewrite until she gets it right. Display of such a persona seems ill suited to the construction of an authentic self. Blogging must then represent some kind of authoritative performance (Arnould and Price 2003). But if so, it is a novel kind, insofar as it is an individual rather than a collective act and a matter of fashion rather than tradition. Fashion blogging, interpreted

in Goffmanesque terms, thus points the way to an expansion of the category of authoritative performances to include an individual's successful enactment of style—the authority of her taste.

Rather than a means to seek affiliation with a community of like-minded consumers, through exhibiting taste preferences useful for drawing boundaries, a Goffmanesque perspective on blogging would point to its suitability for exercising taste in the vertical sense, as a means of drawing a mass audience of strangers. This theorization was explored by examining 10 fashion blogs that succeeded in drawing such an audience.

METHOD

Blog Sampling

In October 2011 *blogpulse.com* estimated there were over 170 million blogs worldwide, with 100,000 being added per day. Likewise, the blog tracking site *Technorati.com* indicates that a majority of Internet users read one or more blogs (Winn 2009). This provides context for how the advent of blogging makes a mass audience potentially available to ordinary consumers.

We sought out fashion blogs that had achieved a sizable audience, relying on seven sources that purported to measure the top fashion blogs by audience size (see note to table 1). Among the selection criteria was that each blog had to be written by a consumer as a personal blog; thus corporate, brand, or retail blogs were eliminated. In addition, the blogs had to be written by amateur consumer bloggers only; in this way, we eliminated freelance photographers' and journalists' blogs that were used as a type of resume to troll for work. The initial cut left us with 27 blogs that appeared most often in the seven sources. Next, we eliminated blogs that were not written by women, as women's and men's blogs were quite different, and we sought a relatively homogeneous sample suitable for generating depth of understanding. For instance, at the time we drew the sample, the most viewed men's blogs focused on the fashion choices of others (both men and women), while women's blogs focused on their own fashion choices and thus only on women's clothing. For the same reason, we set aside blogs that were not originally written in English; in addition, translated blogs might not capture the original word choice and nuance of the blogger. Finally, we excluded the single most famous young fashion blogger (Rosman 2009), as possibly idiosyncratic. This yielded a final sample of 10 blogs (table 1).

Blog Analysis

We conducted an analysis of the verbal and visual texts visible in these blogs (Fairclough 2003; Gleeson 2011), with an emphasis on instances in which taste was asserted and displayed. The method is textual and historical, inasmuch as we treat blog posts as primary sources and examine their development over time (Sewell 2005; Stern 1996). This text analysis differs from netnography in that it does not apply

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF FASHION BLOGS SAMPLED

Fashion blog	Code for citation	Age	Date started	Audience ^a	Economic capital: Paid opportunities ^b	Social capital: Inclusion opportunities ^b
1. <i>Fashion Toast</i>	FT	25	November 2007	30,726	Modeling contract with RVCA Free "gifted" products Paid advertising Sells clothing on separate site	Exclusive invite to New York Fashion Week Featured in <i>Vogue</i> Invite to tour American Apparel factory
2. <i>Karla's Closet</i>	KC	18	April 2008	13,417	Designed a signature handbag for Coach Free "gifted" products Paid advertising Sells clothing on separate site	Exclusive invite to New York Fashion Week
3. <i>Childhood Flames</i>	CF	16	March 2008	10,859	Paid advertising Sells clothing on a separate site	Exclusive invite to New York Fashion Week Exclusive invite to Chictopia's Social Influence Summit Exclusive invite to IFB's Evolving Influence Conference
4. <i>Knight Cat</i>	KNC	21	June 2008	10,484	Paid advertising	None
5. <i>Style Bubble</i>	SB	24	March 2006	7,418	Editor for DazedDigital.com (after establishing blog) Judge for Benetton contest Designed a signature shirt for Borders & Frontiers Free "gifted" products Paid advertising	Fashion show invites/backstage passes to Gucci, Daydream Nation, Versace Invite to Louis Vuitton store opening Exclusive invite to London Fashion Week
6. <i>Because I'm Addicted</i>	BIA	25	January 2007	5,785	Free "gifted" products Paid advertising	Face printed on Forever21 shirt Featured in <i>Teen Vogue</i> and <i>Women's Wear Daily</i> Invite to Grammy party Exclusive invite to IFB's Evolving Influence Conference
7. <i>The Stylish Wanderer</i>	SW	15	August 2008	3,596	Modeling contract with American Apparel Free "gifted" products Paid advertising Sells clothing on a separate site	Exclusive invite to New York Fashion Week Writer for Chictopia (after establishing blog)
8. <i>The Clothes Horse</i>	CH	21	July 2007	2,049	Free "gifted" products Paid advertising Sells clothing on a separate site	Named "blogger of the week" by IFB Featured in <i>Teen Vogue</i>
9. <i>What I Wore</i>	WIW	27	March 2008	1,418	Book published by Ballantine Books/Random House called <i>Recipe for Style</i> Free "gifted" products Paid advertising	Invite to IFB charity event Featured in <i>Lucky</i>
10. <i>Frassy</i>	F	21	September 2007	791	Free "gifted" products Paid advertising Sells clothing on other site	Exclusive invite to London Fashion Week Featured in <i>Vogue</i>

SOURCES.—Delicious.com, Fisher (2010), Independent Fashion Bloggers' (IFB) "Blogger of the Week," Konektor.com, Salter (2010), Signature9 (2010), and *Teen Vogue's* "Blogger of the Moment."

^aThe number of followers of each blog was derived in May 2010 from Bloglovin, which is a website that allows readers to keep track of their favorite blogs by gathering all new posts and keeping them on a common platform. The Bloglovin website provides a running list of "top fashion blogs" based on number of followers.

^bThese examples of social and economic capital were uncovered in the blog analysis and are not intended to be exhaustive.

an ethnographic frame (Kozinets 2007, 2009). It corresponds instead to an element within the fourth theme in consumer culture theory, associated by Arnould and Thompson (2005, 875) with the analysis of literary texts and aesthetic objects (McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Scott 1994; Stern 1989). The focus is on the taste judgments made by bloggers, with a secondary focus on audience response to these judgments.

Two of the authors independently analyzed published

blogger posts and follower comments for each blog. Both the images and the words of current posts were examined for taste practices. That is, what did the bloggers choose to discuss and not discuss? What kinds of words and phrases were used and avoided? What was the content and style of the pictures displayed? Fashion blogs differ from many other blogs by the frequency with which pictures are posted, the centrality of these pictures, and the often scanty text ac-

companiment, a reminder that fashion is a fundamentally visual phenomenon (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010). Each blog was studied until the researchers felt they had a good understanding of the characteristic practices of the blog; this usually entailed studying 20–40 current posts. The researchers also analyzed every comment sent in by followers of the blog to the current posts; on average, between 40 and 200 comments were attached to each current post. The comments were examined for their character and topical focus; in addition, we explored whether the blogger responded to the comments in the comments field or in subsequent posts and in what ways.

The next step in the data analysis was to go back to the blogger's original posts at the inception of the blog. Each blog contained archives of every post, so we returned to the very beginning of each blog and again examined 20–40 archived posts, noting differences and similarities in early versus later blogging practices. (It is considered taboo on fashion blogs to edit previously published posts, and attempted editing is policed by followers. This allowed the blog's progression over time to be analyzed.) The comments to these posts were also examined, but they were much fewer in number (between 0 and 50). The third step was to examine posts in the "middle" of the blog—those situated at a time between the first and the current posts. If blogs had been running for more than 2 years (table 1), we sampled posts and comments from multiple periods in the middle of the blog in order to get a sense of its progression over time. The third type of analysis focused on marketing efforts and examined the practices the blogger used to discuss marketing tactics and comments from followers in response. Quotes from this sampled content are provided largely verbatim and may lack proper spelling and punctuation; quotes are labeled with the blog source (i.e., abbreviated blog code from table 1) and date of publication.

The blogs were analyzed using a grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1998) in which key findings are allowed to emerge from the data. Line-by-line analysis and the constant comparison method were used to identify emergent themes in blogger and follower comments; blog pictures were compared in terms of content, style, placement, and theme (Gleeson 2011). The constant comparison method ensured consistency and allowed nonconfirming cases to be identified. The two researchers used an independent, iterative approach to analyze the blogs, moving back and forth between examining each blog in depth versus examining a cross-section of several blogs at once. Preliminary themes were discussed by two of the authors, tested, expanded, and refined as the analysis progressed. The third author was provided the blog address, field notes, and emerging themes and then vetted the overall model and the mapping of selected quotes and pictures onto the proposed conceptualization, questioning some attributions and calling for better examples of others. Data saturation and redundancy was confirmed independently by the two primary researchers after eight blogs had been coded; all 10 blogs were analyzed, and this was deemed a sufficient sample. Analysis continued

until no further ideas emerged and all of the data could be encompassed in a model of fashion blogging themes and outcomes.

FINDINGS: BLOGGER TRAJECTORY

Initial Position

All 10 bloggers began blogging as ordinary consumers outside of the fashion system. McCracken (1986) describes the fashion system as composed of the designers and manufacturers of fashion clothing and accessories, the media institutions that promote such clothing in editorials and advertising, and the social elite, especially celebrities, who engage in the vast public relations machine of television and movie roles, special event appearances, and talk show and gossip magazine placements (cf. the "gift system" defined in Giesler [2006]). These are the traditional, professional sources that govern the determination of what is fashionable, also recognized by Bourdieu (Rocamora 2002). None of our bloggers was a fashion insider or professional, and no family connections to the fashion system were uncovered. At the time of the launch of their blogs, these 10 individuals appear indistinguishable from the millions of ordinary consumers who make up the market for fashion clothing. Note that "ordinary" in this usage does not mean average or typical, nor does it exclude extraordinary skill, as in the taste displays to be discussed subsequently. We mean "ordinary" in Turner's (2010) specific sense: neither endowed by family connections nor credentialed by professional or institutional position.

Evidence that these bloggers may never have intended their blog to be only a personal journal online can be found in the titles (table 1), which are rhetorically stylized and replete with complex, allusive forms of wordplay: *Fashion Toast*, *Style Bubble*. Wordplay is a device used by mass advertisers to attract consumers by means of aesthetic appeal (McQuarrie and Mick 1996). We infer that these bloggers constructed rhetoricized blog titles to accomplish the same goal. The rhetoricization may also signal to prospective audience members that aesthetic judgments will be on offer.

From Personal Journal to Taste Display

Early posts made at the outset of these blogs give the impression of a consumer using the blog as an online journal for personal disclosure, as described in some of the initial scholarship on blogging (Chittenden 2010; Hodkinson 2007; Kretz and de Valck 2010; Reed 2009). "Just got home from teddys, decided to not go to the after party, we had a great night as it is. me, z and deb went, paparazzi snapped pictures of us all night long . . . they are so clueless . . . the gasteau girls were chillin at a table by themselves, still a foreign concept that the mom and daughter party together. random other models and celebs partied really hard . . . cant help but love la! time for bed as hollywood continues to party" (*BIA* 3/25/07). This post, with its casual focus and lack of attention to spelling and punctuation, describing a

night on the town with friends, would pass unnoticed on Facebook or any other social media site. This is important in that it emphasizes the undermotivated character of fashion blogging: virtually anything that can be posted on a blog could have been posted on one's personal page at a social media site. The key difference is that with a blog, one can potentially reach an indefinitely large audience of strangers.

Posts to these 10 blogs soon cease to resemble private social media posts aimed at friends and quickly begin to transition toward public displays of taste. Here is an example from later in one of the most popular blogs. "Found the perfect gray socks while shopping at Uniqlo in Tokyo with my mom/favorite shopping partner (she's always down to stop randomly to eat and shares my love for finding wearable things in unlikely places). Vaguely sheer and just the right length. This sounds extremely trivial, and sort of is, but I've been looking for something like them forever now" (*FT* 5/12/10). This post came to be read by over 30,000 people. It received 174 comments, such as "OMG Rumi, you are my greatest inspiration EVER, you just rock with your amazing outfits and with your breathtaking photos. You are the best style icon EVER," which expressed appreciation for the aesthetic judgment made by the blogger.

Choosing to display gray socks would seem to be neither here nor there as far as taste as distinction-between is concerned. These gray socks do not serve as a badge of membership in some group (Berger and Ward 2010). Likewise, the socks are not a marker or signal inviting affiliation with other marginalized youths against a fictive mainstream (Thornton 1996); the blogger is, after all, shopping with her mom. It is not the display of gray socks per se on a fashion blog but the selection of a particular brand, length, and opacity of gray socks to display—and choosing to pair them with leather shorts—that constitutes a display of taste leadership. And such displays can be recognized as taste leadership insofar as they attract and hold a large audience (in this case, more than 30,000 people).

Consider next the post reproduced in figure 1, from a different blog. The picture is captioned: "Everything I'm wearing is Vintage, except the Doc Martens. . . . Those babies are fakes, and now the black plastic is peeling away, which I kind of love." We again take this as a claim to be tasteful, in the form of a risky choice. Who knew that peeling plastic fakes could look good, look right—be fashionable?

Further insight into what is going on in this post comes from the recognition that "Vintage" is not a stray capitalization error but the name of a brand of clothing that, according to the manufacturer's website (<http://www.vintage.com>), "is a premier streetwear brand that was born out of the free thinking and creative spirit of the underground music and art cultures . . . [designed for] lyrical wordsmiths, crate digging—vinyl loving deejays . . . fed up with the mediocre mainstream brands from malls and major department stores." The Vintage clothing brand, then, lays claim to the heritage of the club, hipster, or indie culture studied by Arsel and Thompson (2011) and Thornton (1996), with which (real) Doc Martens shoes are also associated. But by

wearing peeling plastic fake Doc Martens, this blogger lays claim to a distinctive personal style. She takes a risk and invites her audience to make a judgment in response: "how does this look?" She exercises taste and makes a display of it for public consumption.

It might be objected that peeling plastic fakes are in fact a signal of subcultural membership—that the blogger here makes use of the aesthetic vocabulary of punk, where trashed versions of an original are routine. However, the idea that she is affiliating with a punk community is challenged by the final lines of the post: "The city is beautifully sunny today. I'll be outside all day reading Victorian literature." It is also challenged by the collective body of her blogging posts. For example, the *Frassy* post in figure 2 does not assert group membership by displaying more indie brands or a punk aesthetic but features a (not faux) fur hat paired with an oversized cardigan and a classic Chanel bag.

A more parsimonious explanation of these posts as a whole is that they build a persona, in Goffman's (1959) terms, an elaborate statement of who the blogger proposes to be taken as: "I am a woman of style. I combine the indie brand of Vintage with the punk brand of Doc Martens yet openly acknowledge I wear fake footwear, while on another day I may pair a real fur hat with a Chanel bag. I make my own fashion statements." Rather than affiliating with a community, the blogger makes a declaration of taste: "I think this looks good." The definition of what may be judged tasteful, in any concrete instance, is not something "that can be learned in school," to use Thornton's (1996, 13) formulation. Rather, audience members with a passion for fashion clothing know taste when they see it. Hence, each taste display by the blogger represents a risk. The blog is an ongoing performance that could bomb at any time (Deighton 1992).

The element of risk also supports the description of these ongoing taste displays as a process of capital accumulation. It is because the blogger takes risks, and is judged tasteful more often than not, that she may be said to accumulate cultural capital beyond what she started with. Taste as judgment power cannot be learned in school, but it can be developed through repeated exercise. A blogger accumulates cultural capital insofar as she succeeds again and again in being judged fashionable and, as a result, develops more and more capacity to take fashion risks and succeed. Per the metaphor of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), once a poker player has amassed a large pile of chips, she can play differently than one who has only a small stake.

Taste judgments may be visually presented, as in the *Frassy* posts just discussed, or offered verbally: "Surely the only reason to like Laquan Smith is his work. I have to say from his previous collections his New York Fashion Week debut has really stepped it up a gear and with these beautifully sculpted underwater-inspired designs, notes of McQueen and Balenciaga vaguely resonate in a collection that looks to be supremely sleek, finished superbly as well as showing a clear amount of ambition. . . . I personally think NYFW could do with even more unique voices in addition to the city's

FIGURE 1
VENTURESOME TASTE DISPLAY



NOTE.—Sourced from *Frassy*, 4/16/10. Text accompanying this image reads: “Everything I’m wearing is Vintage, except the Doc Martens. . . . Those babies are fakes, and now the black plastic is peeling away, which I kind of love. The city is beautifully sunny today. I’ll be outside all day reading Victorian literature.”

‘new gen’ that is currently being galvanised by the likes of the Mac x Milk initiative” (*SB* 4/12/10). Holt (1998, 15) describes the rendering of such taste judgments as connoisseurship, defined as “the development of finely grained vocabularies to tease out ever more detailed nuances within

a category, the expression of opinionated and often eclectic evaluations of alternatives, and the ability to engage in passionate appreciation of consumption objects meeting one’s calculus of ‘quality’ within a category.” Multiple elements of Holt’s definition are recognizable in the *Style Bubble* post,

FIGURE 2

RANGE OF TASTES DISPLAYED WITHIN A BLOG



NOTE.—Sourced from *Frassy*, 10/26/10.

including finely grained vocabularies (“sculpted underwater-inspired designs”), opinionated and eclectic evaluations (“stepped it up a gear,” “more unique voices in addition to the city’s ‘new gen’”), and passionate appreciation (“supremely sleek, finished superbly”). This blog post asserts a strong point of view regarding what is, and what is not, fashionable: an assertion of taste. Thus, the blogger risks her credibility by celebrating this designer over other possible candidates. Such claims of taste can be displayed by posting about any topic germane to the fashion world, such as opinions on specific fashion products (e.g., feathered shorts, cross-shaped rings); viewpoints on particular brands, designers, collections, models, and retailers; and also commentary on conventional media outlets, such as *Vogue*, and even other fashion blogs. A large portion of the verbal content of these fashion blogs ultimately takes this form.

The theory we propose to explain the success of certain fashion bloggers is that cultural capital can be accumulated by iterated public displays of taste that are favorably received—those which draw, hold, and grow an audience. The factor that elevates the successful blogger is her taste, her greater degree of judgment power (Gronow 1997). Specifically, her aesthetic judgment in the realm of clothing is both good and adventurous. It is good judgment insofar as an indefinitely large number of other consumers, if exposed to that picture of gray socks with leather shorts or that review of the designer Laquan Smith, will viscerally respond, “that is fashionable” or “that is to my taste.” With the aid of the web, such a display of taste can now win her an audience. In turn, that favorable response will increase her capacity to exercise taste and encourage her to invest in further dis-

plays of it. The blogger acts as a connoisseur with a megaphone.

But the taste display has to be adventurous as well. As Bourdieu (1984, 91–92) recognized, there is an element of bluff in taste leadership—it demands a certain kind of flair. Any catalog picture will show attractive people wearing nice-looking clothes correctly combined. But fashion is not a matter of right or wrong according to an explicit and ascertainable standard—fashion is not a dress code (Bayley 1991; Gronow 1997). Fashion does not stand still, so that in general, repeating what has already been done cannot secure attributions of “fashionable” and “stylish,” nor can staying within the confines of established selections and combinations of clothing. To be received as a taste leader, and accumulate capital, the blogger must take risks, such as wearing a Vintage outfit with fake plastic boots or pairing a real fur hat with a Chanel bag. In fashion blogging, we find individuals exercising verbal and visual connoisseurship in the course of a trajectory toward an economic and social position that was lacking when they began. Here it appears that aesthetically discriminating taste judgments lead to an advantageous social position, rather than a privileged social position producing a particular kind of taste judgment.

From Community to Audience

The development of these blogs over time is visible in a second respect. Just as bloggers begin by sharing moments in their personal life, early in the blog they also adopt a community orientation toward those who browse the blog. Initially the blogger is thrilled to receive comments and answers questions and suggestions with her own comments (Chittenden 2010) or in her next post, as this typical example illustrates: “Thank you so much for all the kind words and congratulations! I’m going to answer all the questions in that post today, just want to make sure I address them well. One of you mentioned that headbands/scarves would be fun and it inspired me to dig up one of my favorite vintage silk scarves today. Kind of adds a more boho element to the leather skirt” (*FT* 2/25/08). Seeming eager to please, bloggers will ask their followers what they would like to see on the blog. Likewise, early in their trajectory, bloggers also will provide all sorts of personal information in response to questions, such as weight, height, and ethnicity, and tell where to find specific fashion items.

The early interaction between blogger and follower, then, is consistent with the treatment of virtual communities in Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter (2007), who conceptualize computerized discussion forums as sites for the accumulation of social capital. This is defined, in Putnam’s (1995) terms, as a collective possession from which all may benefit and not in terms of Bourdieu’s (1986) definition of social capital, as connections an individual can use to gain preferment. Mathwick et al. (2007) show how norms of reciprocity play a key role in producing collective social capital within an online community (see also Giesler 2006).

Fashion bloggers begin in the same vein, behaving as if the blog were a collective good from which all can benefit

through the accumulation of information about fashion clothing and where all can participate in shaping the content that appears on the blog, per the account of authoritative performances in Arnould and Price (2003). Initially, the blog proceeds as if a virtual community was going to be constructed, with the blogger acting simply as one participant among others. But this complex of behaviors soon disappears as the blogger begins to build an audience.

As her audience grows larger, the blogger’s behavior changes. She stops interacting with her followers. She avoids answering specific questions, ignores suggestions for posts, and refuses to address issues raised in comments. Her practices increasingly depart from the problematization and instrumentalization found by Arsel and Bean (2013) in their study of the institutionalized *Apartment Therapy* blog. Interestingly, this does not bring the growth in audience numbers to a halt. In fact, we observe follower comments to become more uniformly positive as the blogger ignores her followers more and more. As bloggers gain autonomy from their followers’ desires and wishes, they appear to be perceived as more worthy of an audience.

An important contribution of early research on online consumer behavior was to establish the existence and reality of virtual communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Rheingold 2000). It has even been argued that “community is the true ‘killer app’ of cyberspace” (Jarrett 2003, 339). However, this analysis of fashion blogging suggests that community is not the only thing that consumers seek online. In the end, the bloggers studied did not affiliate with or construct a community—they built an audience.

To this point, consumer research has not often theorized the value, to ordinary consumers, of becoming an audience rather than joining a community. A possible answer comes from the organization theorist Karl Weick (1995, 54), who remarked: “when you are lost, any old map will do.” Post-modern consumer society can be a confusing place, offering the overwhelming freedom to dress in almost any way one pleases (Davis 1992). Holt (2002) hypothesized that many consumers would buckle under such freedom and look to “cultural specialists” for guidance; our depiction of bloggers as cultural capitalists and taste leaders draws on this insight (see also Durrer and Miles [2009] on cultural intermediaries). Consumers may be looking for fashion guidance that they cannot get from professional and institutional sources, such as brand advertisers and other credentialed members of the fashion system (McCracken 1986). Such consumers provide a ready audience for a peer consumer who has the taste resources to risk taking a leadership role. We found a large number of comments from fashion blog followers who support the idea that what blogs offer them is aesthetic inspiration and exemplary taste: “Your dress is amazing, too bad it’s vintage, now I can’t buy it. But that makes it even more beautiful. With ur chain, clutch, and shoes makes ur outfit perfect!” (*SW* 6/26/10). “I absolutely LOVE your blog. Your outfits are amazing, and it gives me so many more ideas. Thank you!” (*SW* 6/26/10).

What bloggers offer, then, is not a supportive community,

or a badge of group membership, but an exemplar of taste. Bloggers are engaged in an enterprise of distinction-over: in their posts, they demonstrate a combination of clothing that may never have occurred to the consumer reading the blog but which nonetheless strikes her favorably. Bloggers establish themselves as better at style than others—leaders, not fellow members of a community. This taste leadership appears to be what makes a blog sufficiently valuable to other consumers to build the blogger an audience. “Wow, love this look! It’s so different of all the others if I may say! Super cool!” (SW 6/17/10).

From Curating to Modeling

We observed a third transition as blogs developed over time. From the beginning, these bloggers were oriented toward fashion clothing, much of which is expensive or hard to obtain. This creates a problem: How can an ordinary consumer display taste by selecting and combining garments when these items cost far more than an ordinary consumer can afford, if she can obtain them at all? A solution to this dilemma, and arguably a key factor enabling fashion blogging to flourish, was provided by Polyvore.com. This website provides software that allows anyone to put together different outfits, using real fashion clothing and accessories for sale in stores, by capturing images posted anywhere on the web. Thus, in the beginning, a blogger of little means can showcase her taste and aesthetic discrimination by her selection of specific items from a vast marketplace of fashion goods. Bloggers in our sample “borrowed” fashion pictures from hundreds of brand websites for free at the inception of their blogs to create fashion wish lists and to allow them to render taste judgments concerning the latest styles and runway shows.

As time goes on, however, this “curator” role is not enough to satisfy followers, who seem to prefer to see the blogger as a tastemaker—someone who can actively execute her own style rather than passively selecting and combining others’ styles. This comment from a follower is typical of the views of all the bloggers’ audiences: “Lately, I miss your outfit pictures a lot! I liked seeing your daily wardrobe . . . Anyway, I like your likes! (And still excited about seeing you with a short hairdo again)” (CF 12/06/09). Thus, all of the bloggers in our study, save one, progressed from curating others’ pictures to taking pictures of themselves modeling a unique look. An example of a “daily wardrobe” post is found in figure 3. This type of self-modeling receives high praise from followers: “You are the queen of all things black—and you make it look so good! I love your sense of style” (CF 11/14/09). “Wow coat looks AMAZING on you! But then again most things do ;) Your style is impeccable! Would love to get a full view of your outfit with the boots!” (CF 11/14/09).

Conversely *Knight Cat*, the one blogger who never reveals her own image, shows the potential cost of remaining in a curator role. *Knight Cat* did not achieve the number of followers of some other blogs, and the blogger has not become an industry insider to the same extent. She has third-party

FIGURE 3

DAILY WARDROBE BLOG POST



NOTE.—Sourced from *Childhood Flames*, 11/14/09. Post used wordplay in its title: “A Little Something from New Yoak City.”

paid advertising on her site but had not received the invitations, free clothing, sponsorships, designing opportunities, or publicity of the other nine blogs (table 1). Her refusal to move from curator to model by not showing her followers how she styles herself appears to limit her success in the

fashion blogging field, in spite of her very frequent and well-regarded posts. We cannot be certain *Knight Cat's* refusal to post personal modeling pictures is the reason for these differences in outcome, but the dominance of curating in her blog relative to those of the nine other bloggers was striking.

We interpret the transition from curating to modeling (for the nine blogs that do so) as further evidence that what blog followers seek, and what bloggers provide, are exemplars of taste. Taste in clothing cannot be fully grasped and appreciated on the rack but only when clothing is worn—taste is of the body (Falk 1994). When worn by a person, clothing becomes a look, a style, an exhibition of taste; splayed out on a web page, it may just be clothes. Bayley (1991, 143) notes that “we think of our clothes as we think of our bodies: more so than other possessions, they are an extension of our self” (Belk 1988). This suggests that one cannot really judge the tastefulness of clothing choices until these clothes are seen on (some) body. Followers’ demands for taste leadership drives these bloggers from curating to modeling. An implication of this finding is that to be a truly successful fashion blogger, one may need to have a body type and shape that fits cultural or subcultural expectations (Parmentier and Fischer 2011; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), so that one can demonstrate taste on one’s own body. In this connection, Bourdieu (1984) referred to “bodily capital,” defined as being endowed with a physique that slots into one or another local cultural expectation for how a body should appear.

From Snapshots to Professional Images

Once the transition to modeling is made, the taste imperative drives a further progression in the imagery presented on these blogs. In the beginning, the photos posted by bloggers appear similar to snapshots that ordinary consumers have shared among themselves since long before the advent of social media. Eventually, the bloggers train themselves or their friends to take professional-looking photographs of themselves as models. Part of the growing professionalism of the blogger’s pictures comes from better training and equipment, and advances in web technology, but much comes from reflecting on and consciously copying the poses and settings found in traditional fashion magazine ads. For example, figure 4 shows the changing style of images on *Karla's Closet*. Figure 4A is a typical image from earlier in the blog that shows a series of small, cropped pictures of the blogger modeling her clothing choices. Figure 4B is an image from a later post; the photograph is large, clear and well lit, taken at a closer range, and conveys both clothing detail and setting. This progression in image quality and style is common across the blogs we examined.

This progression can be viewed as the logical consequence of a commitment to aesthetic discrimination. Aesthetically pleasing clothes cannot look their best unless effectively photographed. As soon as the blogger begins to be photographed modeling clothes, she must deal with the visual and aesthetic vocabularies already established by the

FIGURE 4

PROFESSIONALIZATION OVER TIME



NOTE.—Sourced from *Karla's Closet*, 4/28/08 and 6/27/10.

fashion system in which both she and her followers are culturally situated (Schroeder 2002). For example, once they have mastered the typical “model in a setting” images found in the majority of fashion magazines, bloggers may start imitating the grotesque (i.e., strange and unusual) images

that regularly appear in upscale fashion magazines such as *Vogue* (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010). Figure 5 contrasts the early snapshot pictures of one fashion blog, where the blogger poses in front of any old building (fig. 5A), with a typical model-in-a-setting picture (fig. 5B) and with a more grotesque image of the blogger kissing a skull (fig. 5C). This progression does not rely on better photography or technology but a better understanding of high-fashion imagery styles. Through this progression, the blogger demonstrates the increasing sophistication of her displays of taste, a reflection of her ongoing investment in cultural capital.

BLOGGER OUTCOMES

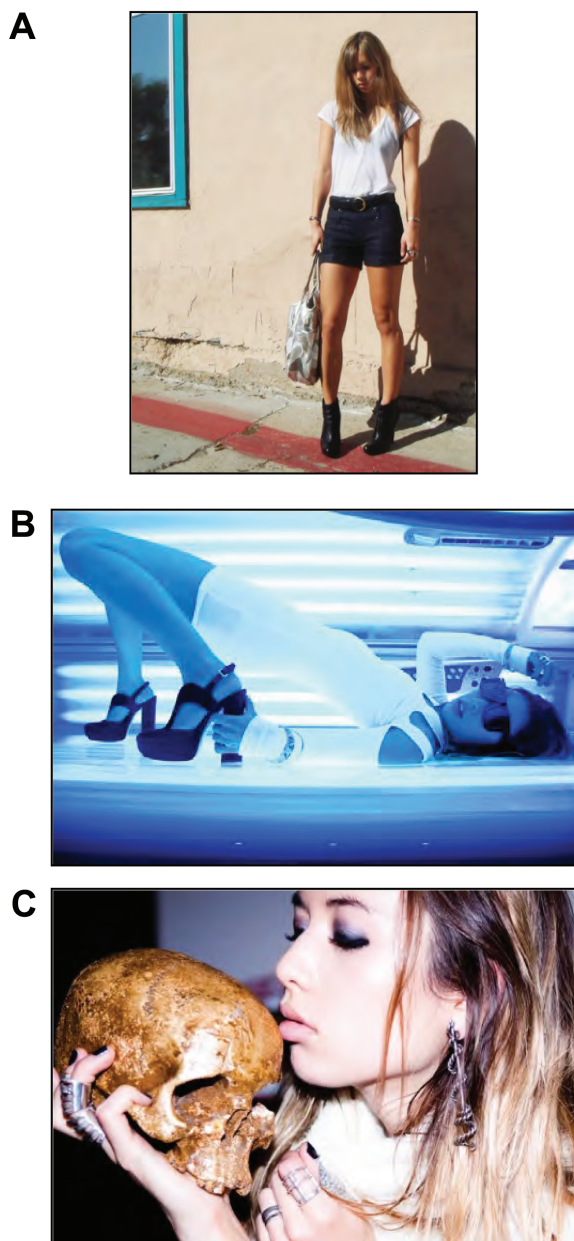
Both economic and social rewards accrued for these fashion bloggers (table 1). Economic rewards include gifts of branded fashion clothing and other merchandise, paid ad placements on the fashion blog, and paid sponsorship of their blog contests. Other paid assignments included modeling branded clothing, designing clothes and accessories, and writing for publication. Their social position improves as they receive invitations to exclusive parties, runway shows, designer open houses, charity appearances, and mentions in the media. In short, by the time we studied them, these bloggers had gained a role within the larger fashion system unavailable to an ordinary consumer, no matter how involved she may be with fashion clothing. Thus, bloggers succeed in joining the traditional fashion system—they do not establish an alternative community on its margins or attempt to escape the marketplace.

A hallmark of any Bourdieusian capital is that it can be exchanged for other forms of capital. Making public displays of taste won these bloggers an audience. This positive response to their initial displays of taste stimulated bloggers to develop their taste further. They did this by taking risks and making taste ventures, while also upgrading their presentation of taste judgments. These developments iteratively produce a positive response in terms of a larger audience and a more favorable audience reaction. This process is modeled in figure 6.

As their audience continues to grow, bloggers come to the attention of the promotional element in the fashion system, which sends economic resources their way, in terms of gifts of merchandise, money for ad placements, and so forth. These resources, which fuel further taste ventures, act to increase the blogger's audience, which maintains the flow of resources, thus setting up a positive feedback loop. As their audience grows, bloggers also gain social connections to prominent insiders within the fashion system, which lends bloggers more prominence, which again maintains or enhances the size of their audience among ordinary consumers, while also reinforcing the audience's perception that the blogger is a taste leader (Pham [2011] describes this as a "prominence dividend"). Having and growing an audience makes a blogger valuable to marketers and to fashion insiders alike, and the interest of both acts to enhance her

FIGURE 5

EVOLUTION OF AESTHETIC STANDARDS



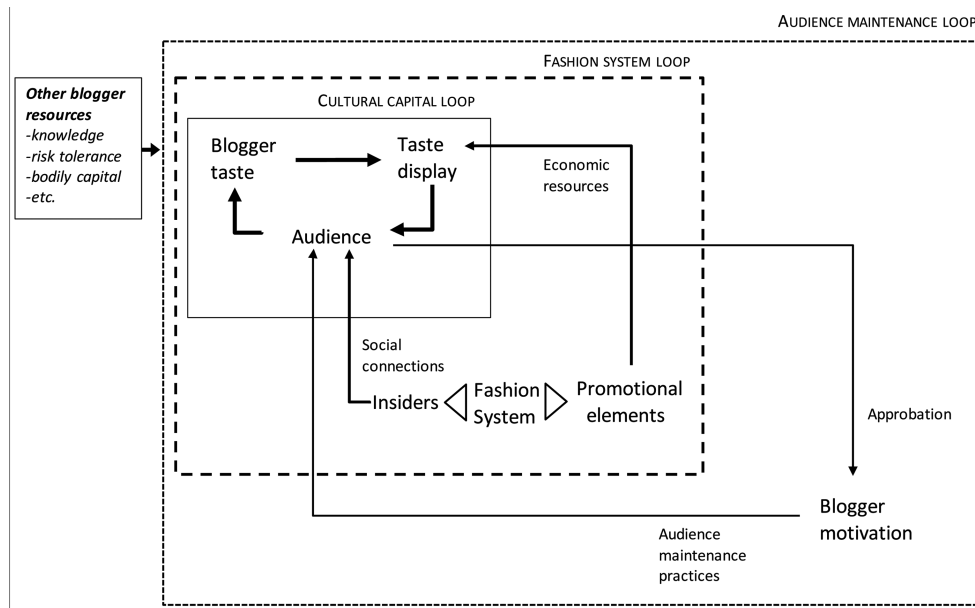
NOTE.—Sourced from *Fashion Toast*: from top to bottom, 1/18/08, 6/9/10, and 5/18/10.

audience size and its approbation for her, which recharges the inner two feedback loops in figure 6.

Countless ordinary consumers, highly involved with fashion, dream of such success, but it is unavailable to all but

FIGURE 6

FEEDBACK LOOPS LINKING BLOGGER'S CULTURAL CAPITAL, THE FASHION SYSTEM, AND BLOGGER'S AUDIENCE PRACTICES



NOTE.—Snapshot of a dynamic process that iterates over time. Three feedback loops are shown. In the innermost loop, a blogger's capacity to make taste displays gains her an audience, and this feedback increases her cultural capital, in the sense of expanding her capacity to exercise taste and make a display of it. In the next feedback loop, once her audience has increased past some threshold, access to it becomes valuable to the fashion system. Prominent fashion insiders (e.g., a magazine editor) now provide social connections to the blogger, which tends to increase her audience further. Likewise, the promotional element also desires audience access, so it sends gifts and payments to the blogger, which further enhance her taste displays and, thus, her audience. In the third loop, having a mass audience motivates the blogger to keep it, which leads to misrecognition practices that maintain it. Each of the loops thus charges the others. Finally, the model acknowledges that nontaste resources may also facilitate blogger success and suggests this as an area for future research.

a few. It is poignant to read this very early post from one of the bloggers:

I've always loved fashion, I like to dream big, so I thought why not just put it out there? Here's some of my wildest fashion dreams:

1. Walk a runway during fashion week. I dunno, I always wanted to be a model, hence maybe why I take tons of pictures of myself! . . .
2. Hang with the big kids. Joe Zee seems like a nice and cool guy, maybe we could collaborate? Anna Wintour wants to have lunch? Sure! I can be there!! (I have a couple of ideas for her anyway).
3. Style an Editorial. We're still in dreamland, right? . . .
4. Launch my own fashion line with funding. And a production team to oversee it all coming together. And show at fashion week. And then be on the front page of *Women's Wear Daily*. (WfW 5/06/09)

Collectively, across the 10 bloggers (with the exception of the magazine front cover), these dreams were realized (table

2). Blogging allowed them to accumulate cultural capital from the small seed with which they began: their ability to make aesthetic discriminations judged suitable by, and sufficiently novel to be of interest to, a mass audience of other consumers. Taste as judgment power fueled these bloggers' success.

MAINTAINING AN AUDIENCE

Practices of Misrecognition

Having gained an audience, bloggers appear motivated to hold on to it. In this respect, the bloggers we studied had an initial advantage over *Vogue* and other institutionally sanctioned fashion outlets on the web that also compete for audience attention. Since clothing is an extension of the self (Entwistle 2000), believable taste in clothing requires that the blog follower, an ordinary consumer, be able to see herself in the taste displays she encounters on the web. This may not be possible when the clothes are worn by a supermodel in a setting impossible for that ordinary consumer

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Finding	Exemplar	Implication
1. Rhetoricization of blog titles	<i>Fashion Toast, Style Bubble, The Clothes Horse</i>	These blogs represent aesthetic performances identified by word play.
2. Initial position outside the fashion system	All	Bloggers began as ordinary consumers.
3. Progression from posts in the style of a personal journal to taste displays	<i>Because I'm Addicted, What I Wore</i>	Blogs serve a different goal than sharing via social media.
3a. Visual connoisseurship	<i>Frassy</i>	Blog posts are taste displays, not group identity signals.
3b. Verbal connoisseurship	<i>Style Bubble</i>	Although they are ordinary consumers, bloggers may possess extraordinary skills or be aesthetically gifted.
3c. Venturesome taste displays	<i>Frassy</i>	Bloggers take taste risks.
4. Built an audience, not a community	<i>Stylish Wanderer, Fashion Toast</i>	Community, built on norms of reciprocity, is not the only goal of online consumption. Taste leadership is also sought and valued.
5. From curating to modeling	All except <i>Knight Cat</i>	Clothing is an extension of the self and the body, and the most effective taste displays require that clothes be shown on somebody.
6. From snapshots to more professional imagery	<i>Karla's Closet, Fashion Toast</i>	Taste displays, to be aesthetically pleasing, require a skilled photographic presentation that reflects cultural expectations.
7. Conversion of cultural capital into social capital and economic resources	All	A sizable audience built through taste displays provides the means to break into the fashion system.
8. Audience maintenance practices: feigning similarity, self-deprecation	<i>Frassy, Childhood Flames</i>	Shows the centrality and importance of audience to bloggers.
9. Embrace of the marketplace and of mass-market brands, without being perceived as inauthentic	All	Authenticity, defined as espousal of craft and artisanal brands, and refusal of mass-market brands, is not required for displays of taste within the fashion domain.

NOTE.—Table entries follow the order of exposition of findings. See text for expansion and examples.

to attain. By contrast, a blog follower can look at the taste display of another ordinary consumer, such as the bloggers studied, and believe “I could look good in that.” Blog followers assert their similarity with the fashion blogger in their blog comments in many different ways: “You look amazing and don’t even get me started on your rad monk shoes. i’ve got a pair, slightly darker in color and of course now, they will be so much cooler to wear since you have a pair, too. xo” (*CH* 5/31/10). “You’re so lovely in these photos, as well! And funny coincidence, I had a white lace dress with *blue* ribbons when I was little, and I wore it for my birthday for several years as well! That made me smile, reading about your birthday dress” (*CH* 6/17/10).

However, once a blogger gains a mass audience and enjoys access to the fashion system, she is no longer truly an ordinary consumer. This poses a threat of loss of audience and, hence, of her newly gained position. One possible solution would be for bloggers, after they achieve some degree of success and begin to cease to be ordinary consumers, to actively misrecognize their changed status and engage in practices that deny the existence of boundaries that would separate them from followers (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Warde 2005). We observed two discursive practices that fit this description: feigning similarity and self-deprecation.

Feigning Similarity. Bloggers feign similarity with their followers by referring to mundane and ordinary aspects of their lives that downplay the glamour and rarity of being a

fashion insider, with its special access and privileges. Here, for example, the blogger complains about her small closet while posting about her attendance at London’s Fashion Week and the “gifting” of clothes to her by designers:

I leave for Fashion Week on Thursday. I am so excited to be back on The Strand . . . probably stumbling all over the place on the impossibly unpredictable cobblestones of Somerset House. Also looking forward to seeing some of the most inspiring people I know. And best yet, I have some exciting clothes coming my way. . . . So I hope to see you there! By the WAY: Have you noticed the size of my wardrobe in these photos?! Have you seen how painfully SMALL it is? About a quarter of my clothes fit in there, the rest are folded in piles that are forever circling my room: from my desk, to the floor . . . and I have even resorted to under my bed. It is a distressing situation! . . . One day I’ll have the walk-in wardrobe that I actually have vivid dreams about at night. (*F* 2/14/10)

Note how the blogger says that she hopes to see her followers at Fashion Week, even though the event is attended by invitation only. In this way, she maintains similarity with her followers by deliberately misrecognizing their inability to join her at the event.

Self-Deprecation. A related practice, which again serves to make the blogger appear less distant, is to express self-deprecation and self-ridicule and to downplay accomplishments. For example, in the *Frassy* post (above), the blogger

states that she will be stumbling all over the cobblestones, implying that she cannot walk in high heels. In this next example the blogger insults her own appearance during an announcement of her involvement in premier fashion events: “Already looking a lil’ haggard . . . I’ve been running around like a chicken with its head cut off the last couple of days—finishing projects for school and finalizing plans for Fashion Week . . . Anyway, I’ll be in New York from the 12th–16th, attending shows and Chictopia’s Social Influence Summit as well as the IFB’s Evolving Influence Conference. Hope you see some of you there!” (*CF* 2/11/10). This post exhibits self-deprecation (“looking haggard”) and feigns similarity (“see you there”).

The self-deprecating language that appears in bloggers’ posts may concern physical characteristics, bad habits, or embarrassing moments, but such deprecation never ventures into the realm of fashion. Bloggers do not ridicule their own taste in clothing. A blogger might say she has a small closet, but she would never say she does not know what to pair together from her closet. A blogger might say she stumbles in high heels, but she would never say she had trouble figuring out which brand and color of heels to buy. Self-deprecation and feigning similarity emerge as strategic practices that misrecognize the blogger’s actual social position vis-à-vis her followers, consistent with the dramaturgical perspective of Goffman (1959).

The payoff from feigned similarity and self-deprecation stems from followers’ apparent desire to perceive bloggers as just like them, only luckier. Unlike the unobtainable, unapproachable supermodels, socialites, or celebrities in fashion magazines, bloggers were real people in the consumer’s own world, virtually displaying how to wear fashionable items using themselves as models. This perceived similarity creates the illusion that a consumer can trade places with a blogger at any time, fueling both heady fantasies of seamlessly becoming a fashion insider and also cementing the connection to the blogger. In the aggregate, feigned similarity and self-deprecation may help to maintain an audience for the blog, as depicted in the outer feedback loop in figure 6, and maintaining a sizable audience is the linchpin of these bloggers’ access to the fashion system.

What is theoretically interesting about the strategic practices of feigned similarity and self-deprecation is that these are used by fashion bloggers to deny boundaries and misrecognize distinction-over. This contrasts with past discussions of cultural capital, in which taste is exercised to exclude others and to enforce distinction-between (e.g., Lamont 1992). By contrast, bloggers’ cultural capital issues from their success in drawing and holding an audience, and continued success in that endeavor requires misrecognition of the boundaries that come to separate blogger from follower. Fashion blogging thus reveals how cultural capital can operate in unsuspected ways to efface rather than enforce boundaries.

Although misrecognition of social position is a central idea in Bourdieu’s own work (Bourdieu 1991), in his examples misrecognition typically takes the form of substi-

tution up, as when a student in the Paris of Bourdieu’s day (and his examiner) misrecognizes his exam performance as due to intellectual merit, rather than to a mere affinity of shared tastes and social background (see the extensive analysis of the grading sheets for the essays used to select students for elite schools in Bourdieu [1996]). Fashion bloggers show the reverse form of misrecognition, a kind of substitution down, in which they deny their factually privileged position relative to followers. The motivated misrecognition of boundaries by fashion bloggers provides another instance of how online consumer behavior provides a fertile setting for working with and extending Bourdieu’s ideas.

Misrecognition and Authenticity

Authenticity has been extensively investigated in cultural sociology as well as consumer research (see chap. 2 in Johnston and Bauman [2010] for an integrative review). As a rule, authenticity is sought in the uncommon and in opposition to the mainstream (Thornton 1996). Thus, Holt (1998) defines a quest for authenticity as avoidance of market-constructed meanings, along with resistance to mass culture and attempts to mask or disguise its influence (Beverland and Farrelly 2009; Campbell 2005; Rose and Wood 2005). Arsel and Thompson (2011) similarly find that greater amounts of cultural capital facilitate rejection of meanings imposed by mainstream culture so that the authenticity of one’s consumption choices and taste preferences can be maintained.

A puzzle to be explained, then, is why the profusion of commercial mentions on successful fashion blogs does not lead consumers to reject or disdain these blogs as inauthentic, as happened to some of the bloggers studied in Kozinets et al. (2010). Each fashion blog is the site of many commercial messages, and each photo is captioned with a list of all the brands worn, including the nail polish. Many different brands are endorsed in each post, including retailers and online shopping sites; most of these brands are well-known, mainstream fashion brands, rather than artisanal or craft brands. Often, the items displayed on the blog are sponsored or gifted by fashion manufacturers, as freely admitted by bloggers. Nonetheless, the response of blog followers remains very positive, as in these follower comments in response to overt marketing on the blog demonstrate: “You are so stylish and I love your blog and I don’t begrudge you any of the freebies you receive! I can only imagine the time and effort you put into this blog—you deserve all the good things that come your way. . . . Plus I enjoy looking at you wearing the shiny new things!” (*FT* 5/18/10). “Love [brand] designs but they owe you HUGELY for the free press. You are such a great writer. They should be lucky to get so much press from you!!!” (*CF* 12/10/09). “Having been a fan of your blog (and your 007-keenness for style) for a while now, i must say how truly happy i am to see that you are clearly getting more and more attention and recognition for your talent! you are a true inspiration!” (*WIW* 6/15/10).

One reason why the commercialization rampant on these fashion blogs does not produce the jarring effect found by

Kozinets et al. (2010) is that authenticity, in Holt's (1998) sense of rejection of marketplace meanings, may well be more important when a blog presents itself as a personal blog, an online journal where identity work will be performed (Chittenden 2010; Parmentier and Fischer 2011). Intrusion of marketing efforts then becomes a transgression. Successful fashion blogs instead represent a public display of taste, and fashion products and their brands are intrinsic rather than extrinsic to the taste asserted. The appearance of free gifts on the blogs becomes a ratification of the blogger's taste leadership, not a violation of trust.

Another reason may be the effectiveness of the misrecognition practiced by the blogger. If followers live vicariously through consecrating the blogger (Bourdieu 1991), then the blogger's receipt of invitations, gifts, and deals simply reinforces this consecration. That is, unusual privileges and a bounty of gifts serve to confirm the blogger's taste leadership. Consumers accept all sorts of overt marketing in these blogs without scorning any lack or loss of authenticity, consistent with the idea that mainstream taste leadership defines what fashion bloggers offer to their audience.

DISCUSSION

We built on the later Bourdieu's ideas to make cultural capital more analogous to financial capital: something that can be invested, risked, and accumulated (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Under this dynamic account, fashion bloggers act as cultural capitalists, amassing more and more capital as they continue to make venturesome displays of taste. Once these taste displays have acquired a large enough audience, bloggers' cultural capital becomes convertible into economic and social capital, as bloggers begin to be assimilated into the established fashion system. Audience acquisition then becomes self-reinforcing, as multiple positive feedback loops, leveraging institutional elements of the fashion system, and the bloggers' own practices of misrecognition come into play.

Intrinsic to this formulation is a depiction of the web as a causal factor that makes available new forms of consumer behavior. Past consumer research has tended to treat online consumer behavior as an analog of some corresponding offline consumer behavior and to conceptualize the web simply as a new location where preexisting consumer phenomena unfold much as before. Thus, marketplace communities can be established online the same as offline (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), norms of reciprocity govern online communities the same as offline (Giesler 2006; Mathwick et al. 2007), and consumers' postings online correspond to word of mouth offline (Kozinets et al. 2010).

By contrast, a focus on consumers' newfound capacity, courtesy of the web, to acquire a mass audience requires a new theorization. Ordinary consumers did not have access to such an audience before the web. For consumers, there is no offline equivalent of a verbal-visual blog, a Yelp restaurant review, or user-generated video content. Before the web, only professionals holding an institutional position could publish their writing or disseminate video. Ordinary

consumers were confined to participation in their immediate social networks and communities; they could not grab the megaphone and acquire a mass audience of strangers for their acts of consumption. As a consequence, the value some consumers place on acquiring a large audience of strangers, and the value other consumers place on participating as a member of such an audience, had not been theorized in consumer research. We sought such a theory in the idea of a megaphone effect, adapting Bourdieu and Goffman to conceptualize the process whereby an ordinary consumer can acquire and maintain a mass audience.

The distinctiveness of the megaphone effect, as manifest in fashion blogging, may emerge more clearly through a contrast with earlier studies of online consumer behavior by Giesler (2006) and Schau and Gilly (2003). In their study of personal websites constructed before blogging had diffused as a widespread practice, Schau and Gilly found consumers who undertook to communicate to an unknown public without institutional support, in rough parallel to what we found in fashion blogging. The key difference is that the websites in their study were ultimately intended to reach individual unknown others in order to set up a dyadic interaction, as, for instance, with future romantic partners or potential employers. Giesler's (2006) study of peer-to-peer file sharing through Napster is also an important predecessor to this study, in that it defines a gift system, parallel to what we, following McCracken (1986), refer to as the fashion system. For Giesler, a gift system is not merely a set of dyadic gift-giving relationships, or a bounded community of reciprocal give and take, but an overarching sociocultural structure that rests on, and provides an opportunity to demonstrate, social distinction (cf. Bourdieu 1980, 98–101). Likewise, we represent the fashion system as a site in which ordinary consumers, by means of the web, can attain distinction. The key difference here is that taste leadership played no role in the file-sharing gift system studied by Giesler (2006), whereas we argue that it is taste that determines a blogger's distinction within the fashion system.

The effect of our adaptation of Bourdieu is to highlight the role of taste in consumption, particularly online consumption, even as it shifts the emphasis away from existing theorizations of how taste operates. Current conceptualizations focus on what might be called the horizontal operation of taste: the ways in which taste preferences group consumers together and serve to divide an Us from a Them—distinction-between (Lamont 1992). Our investigation of mass audiences shifted the focus to the vertical operation of taste: the fact that judgment power—the capacity to make aesthetic discriminations that can win an audience—provides an opportunity to distinguish oneself as above the rest. This action of taste to produce distinction-over conforms to a sociological perspective in which achieving social prominence may be as important as securing an authentic identity (Goffman 1951, 1959).

In adopting Gronow's (1997) definition of taste in terms of judgment power and aesthetic discrimination, in one respect we departed from rather than adapted Bourdieu's own

point of view. Bourdieu, throughout his career, was hostile to what he called the ideology of giftedness (Bourdieu 1990, 109): the supposition that aesthetic ability or good taste was an inborn personal gift independent of the social position and historical context of the bearer, and the related assumption that objects themselves could be beautiful, tasteful, or fashionable, as opposed to being deemed such by culturally and socially situated individuals. For Bourdieu, good taste meant only the taste of the ruling class, taste judgments legitimated by the social position of the one judging. As Gronow (1997) notes, this theoretical position is unsustainable, given the fluidity and mobility of postmodern consumer society, and is particularly unsuited to the sphere of fashion, where mutability is a defining characteristic.

With the post-Kantian demise of the idea that taste hierarchies are universal (Gronow 1997), the horizontal operation of taste came naturally to the fore, in consumer research as elsewhere. Taste was relativized and made particular to communities and subcultures. Nonetheless, selectivity, exclusion, and hierarchy continued to operate in consumption spheres such as clothing. Mainstream mass society endured, and aesthetic judgments about consumption objects continue to be made and contested there. Tasteful, in the vertical sense, now consists in apprehending what might attract the approbation of a mass audience. Accordingly, taste in fashion can be defined as a gift that a select few consumers possess. By means of the web, these select few can now leverage that gift into cultural capital, which can in turn be converted to social position and economic resources.

Finally, it is important not to oversell the megaphone effect as instanced in fashion blogging. A particular concern of Turner (2010) was to debunk the idea that the demotic turn represents any kind of democratization of power. With Lovink (2008) and Pham (2011), he calls into question the utopian cast of some early celebrations of the web as an emancipatory medium that would place power in the hands of the people. For Turner, there is no relinquishment of political or institutional power consequent to the demotic turn; what changes is who gets access to a mass audience. There is a democratization of communication opportunities, not a change in who exercises power. Likewise, the fashion bloggers we studied did not break free of McCracken's (1986) fashion system and certainly did not break it up; they broke into it.

What is distinctive about the megaphone effect is the absence of institutional mediation: these fashion bloggers acquired their initial audiences by dint of their own actions. This distinguishes the megaphone effect from reality television on the one hand and fast fashion on the other (Crane and Bovone 2006; Ferdows, Lewis, and Machuca 2004). In fast fashion, a clothing manufacturer—an institution—seeks out fashion innovations on the street among the people and puts certain of these street fashions into production. As with reality television, originally demotic elements get picked up and presented to a mass audience, but in each case the pertinent media and manufacturing institutions control the

process. Fashion blogging, online reviewing, and user-generated content represent something different, insofar as these endeavors reduce the role of institutions by making them ancillary rather determinative. But the megaphone effect remains a matter of access to audience, not accession to the ranks of power.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The taste leadership on display in the fashion blogs of the young women we studied, and its inferred role in explaining their acquisition of a mass audience, may not generalize as an explanation for the success of other kinds of blogs, such as technology blogs or even to other kinds of fashion blogs, such as those undertaken by men, or originating outside the developed Anglo-Saxon societies in which our blogs were situated (Pham 2011). Nor can taste leadership be regarded as the exclusive explanation for the success of young female bloggers in general, some of whom may blog as part of an identity project or as a means to affiliate with a particular subculture. We can only assert that some blogs—those studied here—do gain a mass audience because of the taste they display.

Likewise, we studied blogs at a particular juncture in the diffusion of web technologies. Whether blogging, on fashion or any other topic, will continue to provide ordinary consumers access to the megaphone going forward is unknown. The megaphone effect itself seems likely to endure for some time, but the different routes by which consumers may access that megaphone are likely to shift and evolve. Similarly, although we linked blogging to Yelp reviews and to YouTube haul videos, and address Pinterest boards below, the exact profile of similarities and differences across different means of getting hold of the megaphone remains to be ascertained.

In a similar vein, the finding that (in)authenticity seemed neither here nor there in explaining the success of these fashion blogs requires further probing. Prior work in consumer research has placed great importance on the quest for authenticity as a driving motivation for consumer action (Beverland and Farrelly 2009; Price and Arnould 2003) and has often seen authenticity as requiring an oppositional stance toward the marketplace and toward mass market brands in particular (Holt 2002). Might authenticity be less determinative of the behavior of mainstream consumers, as opposed to consumers residing in a distinct subculture with an oppositional cast (Thornton 1996)? This is an issue that requires further research.

Taste Goods

Taste displays leading to the accumulation of cultural capital should be evident in other categories and contexts as well. One task for future research is to set a boundary on the kinds of consumer behavior in which a dynamic conception of cultural capital founded on taste as judgment power can be explanatory. Taste may only be relevant when, per Thornton (1996), things that cannot be learned in school are central. When knowledge that can be learned in school

provides relevant expertise, or when professional and institutional experience is important, taste may not be pertinent. Put another way, whenever Becker's (1993) idea of human capital can provide an adequate explanation for consumer behavior, cultural capital may not have explanatory power (Ratchford 2001).

Within this first limit, a second limit may be glimpsed: not all taste judgments can produce cultural capital. Whereas taste is present anywhere that an aesthetic discrimination can be made, the exercise of taste can only accumulate cultural capital in circumstances in which preference is possible. That is, taste leadership, rather than simply taste clustering, must be possible for cultural capital to come into play. In this study, taste leadership was manifest as the acquisition of a mass audience; other manifestations may be possible.

A third limit confines the applicability of a dynamic conception of cultural capital. This research does not deny the continued pertinence of a static notion of cultural capital wherein large amounts of it come into one's possession as a family endowment or as a result of institutional position, education, or occupation. High levels of taste—taste that will be ratified by large numbers of those one regards as social peers—can still be produced as a result of being born into or acquiring a favorable social position. We argued simply that the reverse sequence, in which the exercise of taste itself leads to a higher social position, is also possible and found an anchor case for this trajectory in fashion bloggers' acquisition of a mass audience online.

Pulling together these threads, a dynamic conception of cultural capital may be most applicable to three broad categories of consumer goods: fashion, as studied here; food, including restaurants (Johnston and Bauman 2010); and home decor, including all visible aspects of the presentation of the abode, both interior and exterior (Arsel and Bean 2013; Lynes 1955/1980). These domains are offered in Bourdieu (1984, 78) as sites for the operation of cultural capital in everyday life and as a focus of restrictive practices in Goffman (1951). These three spheres also provide much of the material for post-Bourdieuian scholarship on taste (Bayley 1991; Falk 1994; Gronow 1997; Warde 1997). Of course, taste operates much more widely in consumer behavior, as in the consumption of music, art, and travel; the argument is only that food, fashion, and home decor are good places to start in further exploring the role of taste leadership in consumer behavior.

Forms of Capital

Another task for future research is to examine what Bourdieu called the "rates of exchange" and "modes of conversion" among types of capital. Arsel and Thompson (2011) intriguingly showed how dynamically acquired social capital can be converted into embodied cultural capital, while we showed how cultural capital, accumulated through public displays of taste, can be exchanged for both economic rewards and social connections. As part of this effort it may be worthwhile to reexamine the role of social capital in

consumption, building on sociological research concerning taste (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006). It has long been noted that Bourdieu's conception of social capital lies at a far remove from that of Putnam (1995) and that these two do not exhaust the definitions of social capital on offer (Baron, Field, and Schuller 2000). There is thus an opportunity to evolve conceptions of how social capital operates in consumption as we undertook to do with cultural capital. Likewise, the exact relationship between symbolic capital—a formulation that occasionally crops up in Bourdieu's work—and cultural capital remains to be ascertained (Üstüner and Thompson 2012).

Fashion blogs are not the only instance of online consumer behavior in which a Bourdieusian analysis may bear fruit. For instance, Yelp provides multiple pieces of information suitable for ranking other Yelp members, roughly parallel to our use of follower counts to assess bloggers. One of these indexes, number of friends, rather directly indexes Bourdieu's definition of social capital in terms of social connections, while another, the lifetime total of reviews rated as "cool," perhaps indexes symbolic capital, even as number of reviews written might index cultural capital. Data from the site thus offer a rare opportunity to test simultaneously the impact of varying levels of different types of capital on the production and consumption of online reviews. Finally, what blogging enabled us to do with fashion, and what Yelp may enable future researchers to do with food consumption, Pinterest may enable for home decor, inasmuch as pictures of decor play a major role on this site and various metrics such as following another consumer's pinboard and repinning a picture are available for investigation (see also houzz.com). In all these online sites, acts of consumption serve as the focus of social action with respect to a mass of strangers, indicating that these engagements may reward sociological investigation.

Toward a Sociological Perspective on Consumer Culture

Consumer researchers have learned a great deal about consumers' pursuit of identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Parmentier and Fischer 2011), the role of community in supporting identities formed in opposition to the mainstream (Thornton 1996), and the ways in which authenticity can be claimed or disputed (Arnould and Price 2003). Less is known about the practices consumers engage in to improve their social position, how mainstream success may be pursued through acts of consumption, or the processes whereby an ordinary consumer can gain preference over others outside of an institutional path. The current study suggests that many consumers wish to join audiences, as well as participate in communities; that a select few ordinary consumers desire to acquire an audience for their acts of consumption; and that both of these actions can readily be observed online. Hence, the time seems ripe to pursue more sociological formulations of online consumer behavior (Nicosia and Mayer 1976).

In this regard, Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) innovative treatment of the existence and prevalence of community in consumption marked a swing of the pendulum in social history. As originally conceived by German sociologists such as Tonnies, the marketplace was portrayed as the antithesis of community and, in fact, the agent of its destruction. Following Muniz and O'Guinn, consumer research has explored how consumers construct and participate in diverse kinds of marketplace communities, including virtual communities (Mathwick et al. 2007). That work has served as a much needed corrective to individually centered and purely psychological accounts of consumption. But the gist of the sociological perspective advanced in the current research is that consumers do not only affiliate with communities—they also seek positions in society, which is to say, vis-à-vis a mass of strangers. These positions may not only shape but be shaped by, and even attained by, acts of consumption. In fact, courtesy of the web, a new kind of social position has emerged: that of the taste leader who takes hold of the megaphone, builds an audience for her consumption, and thereby gains a position. This rich new vein of web-enabled consumer behavior awaits further exploration.

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