

Spring 4-16-2012

Dressing Their Best: Independent Fashion Bloggers and the Complexities of Ethos

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DRESSING THEIR BEST: INDEPENDENT FASHION BLOGGERS AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF ETHOS

by

MELODY HEFFNER

Under the Direction of Dr. Mary Hocks

ABSTRACT

Fashion is a site of cultural production where issues of gender, identity and consumerism meet. While the rhetoric of the fashion industry often remains focused on innovation at the expense of women's lived experiences, independent fashion bloggers provide a necessary cultural critique of its practices. However, as the fashion industry pays more attention to bloggers in order to engage their growing readership, bloggers' oppositional role has become more complicated. To explore the current context of these women's writing in relation to a powerful economic industry, I analyze the role that ethos plays as a rhetorical concept and analyze how it is used by female bloggers who write about women's fashion. In light of recent scholarship and of the current media landscape, bloggers' use of ethos is important to their work even as it is complex and contradictory.

INDEX WORDS: Ethos, Rhetoric, Fashion, Blogs, Visual rhetoric

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by

MELODY HEFFNER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my committee whose time, patience and support have been invaluable, I am deeply indebted and grateful. Your insights and encouragement have made it possible for me to articulate in words the ideas I've had on this subject for a long time.

To my mother and grandmother, thank you for sharing your experiences and excitement about clothing and fashion and the way they can be used and enjoyed.

And to my husband, thank you for being so incredibly encouraging and patient during this process.

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1 DEFINING TERMS

1.1 Introduction

What exactly does it mean to talk about fashion and to analyze whether or how it might be rhetorical? If fashion does communicate, what might its varied forms tell us about the ethos of the wearer in regard to the rhetorical situation in which an outfit or garment is worn? Which is the real site of communication—the garment itself, the way it is worn, or the writing and images that circulate of and around it in the larger culture? Could all of these rhetorical situations occur simultaneously and perhaps influence one another? I begin with a personal anecdote to ground some of these questions.

When I interviewed for a job several years ago, the male director who interviewed me wore jeans, loafers and a collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. I was dressed in a solid black wool pant suit with a blue and white watercolor print blouse that tied in a bow at the neck—professional yet feminine. Also present at the interview was a female manager who reported to the male director. She was dressed formally, like me, in a black pencil skirt, conservative heels, and a green, yellow and white geometric print blouse. In the end, aside from the fact that the interview went well for professional reasons on each side, I believe that the clothing we each wore that day communicated appropriately: the male director's outfit matched his casual yet professional demeanor and my suit expressed my respect for the roles of my interviewers and an appropriate understanding of my need to convey my professionalism as an interviewee. The female manager presented an appropriate level of both authority and friendliness. The job interview is a good example of a rhetorical situation in which clothing is related directly to ethos. Sociologist Colin Campbell explains that "Typically a job applicant is not attempting to convey wealth, status or even fashion-consciousness to prospective employers, but personal qualities of ethical or moral significance. In other words these occasions represent attempts to use clothes as a 'language of

character” (Campbell 163). Presenting oneself in a positive moral and ethical light is a direct effort to establish ethos.

When I was hired and began working with these two people, I saw that the director’s casual clothing in the interview, while it could’ve been purposely chosen to put me at ease, was more likely just an average workday uniform for him, since I soon saw that he dressed that way every day. In working with the female manager over the years, I have seen that she uses dress differently than many of her male colleagues: although she dresses casually most days, she dresses up in skirt and heels for most important events, whether it’s interviewing potential entry-level employees or attending meetings with senior management. By contrast, most of her male colleagues only wear dress pants, ties or suits for meetings with their superiors.

There are two ways to understand this story as it relates to the concept of ethos. First, the female manager’s strategic deployment of dress clothes, especially when worn to meet with people who are lower than her on the corporate ladder, hints that she aims to establish credibility with people in a different way than many of her male colleagues. Instead of speculating here why that might be, or pointing out that certainly there are male interviewers who dress up to interview entry-level workers too, I want instead to highlight the simple fact that the two people who interviewed me use clothing in different ways with different audiences.

The above situation would seem to be an apt illustration of Aristotle’s definition of ethos in *On Rhetoric*. There was indeed “persuasion through character” which resulted from the details of our interaction (clothing as well as speech and gestures), and the persuasion they affected on me resulted “not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person” since I’d never met or heard of either of them before (Aristotle 38). Ethos arose solely out of the immediate rhetorical dimensions of our interaction. In the interview, I was convinced that this was a place with smart, fun people who were also professional, knowledgeable about their field, and would be supportive of my career and ambitions.

But Aristotle's succinct yet vague definition of ethos has come into question in recent years, as rhetoricians seek to define this core rhetorical concept more clearly. Defining ethos as simply "credibility" or "ethics" is not sufficient for a term that is so central to the function and theory of rhetoric. James Baumlin's edited collection *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory* located the concept within post-colonial and feminist critical approaches. The goal of the collection was to question the idea of ethos as located solely in the rhetorical situation and to ask questions about how ethos is used by marginalized speakers. Does the ability to convey authority, for example, depend on the personal characteristics of the rhetor and his or her position in society? To revisit my example once more: the female manager and I were dressed in a similar manner (conservative black suits with pops of color) at about the same level of formality. In the conventional understanding of Aristotle's term, we both aimed to exude a professional ethos. But a closer look at the situation reveals that "professional ethos" is too vague a description to accurately describe the different messages we aimed to send through our appearance, behavior and speech. She used formal dress to command my respect, perhaps because she was not actually the official hiring manager (or, at least this is the motive I assign to her as a result of her clothing choice, which further illustrates how slippery a subject's control of their ethos can be). By contrast, I wore my black suit to gain professional acceptance and approval, rather than respect. Even though we were both "power dressing" (Entwistle, "Power Dressing" 208), the ethos we each sought to create with similar clothing conventions differed because of our different subject positions—a common understanding in sociological fashion theory (Davis 151).

But the varying position of the subject is not the only theoretical conflict to be found in the conventional definition of ethos. Nearly a decade after Baumlin's book, Michael J. Hyde edited *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, reviving some of the older definitions of ethos by initiating an etymological investigation into the word. By focusing on definitions that predate Aristotle's, Hyde revived a "primordial" meaning of the term as "dwelling places" (Hyde xii). He asked his contributors to write with this definition in mind

and to “understand the phrase “the *ethos* of rhetoric’ to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’” (Hyde xii).

Before the Internet, there were limited places where ordinary women (as opposed to female journalists or scholars) could discuss issues of body and dress in public forums. They published a few books (which were rarely reprinted) and discussed such issues in private conversations, but the issues they raised couldn’t be publicized in the way that they can on blogs today. In performing my analysis, I hope to help “expose the strategies through which rhetoric transforms the material events of the world into sociopolitical power” by discussing the roles that fashion and clothing play in women’s lives and how they generate topics of discussion from them (Warnick 69). This online public discourse provides a widely available medium in which it becomes possible to consider “theory as an immanent vernacular, closely tied to practice while reflecting on it from within” (Mitchell 211). In the interest of establishing my own ethos, I must reveal that I have been an avid reader of these blogs for several years and that their approach has had both an emotional and intellectual impact on me. Although the writing is what initially attracted me, recent discussions of imagery on fashion blogs have made this topic ripe for analysis as well. But rather than deconstructing the details of the images (many of which are borrowed or stock images anyway), I will investigate the questions or personal issues that the pictures raise for both bloggers and readers.

1.2 What is fashion?

In my personal anecdote, I attempted to highlight one small part of the relationship between gender and attention to dress . . . or should I have said fashion? What exactly is fashion, and how is it different from mere clothing or dress? Fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson provides the most succinct definition: “Fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles” (Wilson 3). The defining feature of change in fashion forms has been analyzed by scholars in various disciplines.

In their search for meaning in clothes, early historians of dress traced the rise and fall of clothing forms in popularity; economists and Marxist critics invoked the influence of capitalism's ever-insatiable need to create new consumables; philosophers contemplated the influence of dress on the mind or soul; and both 19th century moralists and many late 20th century feminists decried fashion as a form of social degradation or oppression. While all of these approaches shed light on different aspects of human dress and helped to contextualize and define fashion as an area of study, they rarely examined ethos as a specific rhetorical component of fashion. Instead, ethos is rarely examined and is usually understood simply as an implied and inevitable result of the fashion discourse that the critic supports or opposes. However, I argue that the way women use, interpret and react to fashion and clothes is a process of communication whose purpose and methods are almost exclusively defined by ethos. In order to incorporate the role of ethos, I use Wilson's definition cited above, and add three words of clarification: "Fashion is *a discourse of* dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles."

The beginning of fashion dates back to the development of mercantile capitalism in the Middle Ages, when expanded trade and the growth of cities coincided with technological developments in tailoring as well as the expansion of royal courts (Wilson 16). Anne Hollander explains that these economic, technological and social changes combined to produce "a compelling new system for Western elegance" that was "relentlessly secular" in its difference from traditional religious or ceremonial costume ("Sex and Suits" 14, 15). In most ancient and pre-modern societies, differences in form and style between the clothing of the wealthy and the peasant, the old and the young, and in many cases even men and women, were barely discernible and their forms remained relatively stable decade after decade. (Wilson 18).

This lack of differentiation explains why Aristotle's mention of the rhetorical use of "the clothes of those who have suffered" in *On Rhetoric* referred to the implied condition of the clothing as ragged and dirty rather than to its design (154). In his footnote on this comment, George Kennedy cites

Euripides' portrayal of Telephus in rags as a prime example of the use of clothing used for rhetorical emphasis. Kennedy also remarks that defendants in Greek courts likely wore old or dirty clothing to arouse the pity of their judges (Aristotle 154). Here, we are to understand that a defendant would likely have worn the same type of draped garment that his judges wore and that what caused his clothing to signify as a sign of poverty was its decrepit condition—not its style. In this case, clothing rather than fashion was being used as a rhetorical sign, since ancient Greek culture predates the development of what is now called fashion.

The rhetorical uses of fashion (as opposed to conventional forms of dress) were not clearly laid out until the publication of Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* in 1967. By the 1950s when Barthes began his study, several centuries of Western capitalist expansion and textile development had culminated in the dominance of French fashion magazines that worked with the Paris fashion houses to dictate style to women around the world (Wilson 89). This process of clothing differentiation inside a capitalist economy is the discourse that Barthes analyzed through the writing in the magazines. By focusing on fashion's written text (and fashion's imagery in some of his other works), his book laid the foundations of rhetorical study of fashion and fashion writing that paved the way for the study of other types of fashion discourse, like blogs, that I study here.

The Fashion System was the first large-scale attempt to catalogue and organize the language of "written clothing" as a rhetorical part of modern media (Barthes 3). Despite the severely limited scope of his research, in which he analyzed only two French fashion magazines from a single year, the structural approach Barthes outlined is a crucial starting point for understanding the rhetorical dimensions of fashion writing. His analysis of the dominant fashion discourse withstood the test of time and in some ways has proven extremely accurate by the developments of the past several decades. He outlined the voice of fashion rhetoric as "too serious and too frivolous at the same time" and he recognized the ways that voice reflected the culture's conventional views about women (Barthes 242).

1.3 What are fashion blogs?

The growth of the blogosphere in recent years has led to the development of niche communities within larger parts of the web. In this case, “fashion blogs” in the general sense are those that discuss some specific part of the fashion world. However, there are also now street style blogs, shopping blogs, fashion blogs and personal style blogs. The small community of bloggers I analyze in this study usually refer to themselves as the personal style, beauty or body image blogs. They share an interest in clothing that extends beyond simply reporting trends or providing opinions on current styles; these bloggers also address topics like personal budgeting, sustainable clothing design and the need for more diversity in advertising. This emphasis on a reflective lifestyle is, in fact, one of the characteristics that most differentiates this group of blogs from other types of fashion blogs and also from the ethos of mainstream fashion magazines.

Ordinary women are the primary consumers of the fashion industry and the Internet gives them a place where they can voice opinions on the clothes and values that are being marketed to them. Fashion blogs serve as a public forum where consumers and citizen critics can oppose sizing standards, comment on the decline in the quality of women’s clothing and critique advertising campaigns they find tasteless or offensive. The development of the internet and the rise of social media in recent years have led to the creation of countless new public spheres that are no longer limited by geography or dominated by the publishing industry. The blogs that I will analyze weave questions about career dress, personal creativity, budgeting and body image into a well-rounded whole that is part of a very consciously-constructed yet personal ethos of citizen criticism that aims to undermine the dominant discourse of mainstream fashion.

These bloggers’ work provides fruitful ground for the study of ethos in fashion in several different ways. First, all of the blogs I examine can all be understood as “citizen criticism” in that they are written by non-academic women who choose to critique the dominant fashion industry and press in

some degree (Eberly 1). Some, like *The Beheld*, use analysis and critique as the central mission of their blog, while for others the criticism is less analytical and instead motivated by personal dissatisfaction with the way the fashion industry fails to serve their needs. *Already Pretty* and *Alterations Needed* discuss ways that clothing sizing and advertising disenfranchise large groups of women by not catering to women who don't fit the fashion industry's mainstream sizing mold. Even blogs with large sponsorships and close ties to the fashion industry take this critical stance: *YouLookFab* is the example of this type that I will examine. Because all of the blogs in this study take a critical stance to some degree, the role of the citizen critique is a defining factor and enables a discussion of the ethos of this particular role in the blogosphere as it plays out in different ways—in the tone of the writing, the use of imagery and the importance of audience to the blogs.

1.4 Fashion's Ethos

Rosa A. Eberly's 2000 book *Citizen Critics* anticipates two recent developments related to ethos and the Internet: the emphasis on alternate definitions of ethos, especially as "dwelling place" and the development of online communities as critical public spheres. Eberly analyzed literary public spheres that developed during the 20th century around contentious novels, in order to discover the topics raised by ordinary citizens in reaction to them. Like many recent rhetorical critics, she finds that the strict Aristotelian ethos of good sense, good will, and good moral character "is not adequate either for studying and teaching transitions from private to public subjectivities or for studying and teaching subjectivity-formation on the World Wide Web and in other computer-mediated settings" (Eberly 170). Drawing on Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (which notably discusses the role of fashion in public self-presentation), Eberly suggests that the rhetorical act of public presentation "offers rhetors a means of thinking about how they might construct various *ethe* to invent and present themselves in different publics or at different points in a public's process of forming, acting, possibly disintegrating" (Eberly 171).

Community disintegration is common in online networks, though they often evolve rather than disintegrate completely. The fashion blog is not always a long-term pursuit, and changes in women's lives often preclude the time it takes to maintain a blog. However, the bloggers who do keep their blogs long-term are constantly making new connections as some of the older ones fall away. Recently, the bloggers' online community engagement has expanded beyond their primary topics around fashion to include engagement with DIY, sewing and tech blogs. This overlap shows that topics in online discourse are often not as static as topics were in Eberly's literary public spheres because their object of study is an ongoing, evolving discourse rather than a single object of cultural production like a novel. This topical overlap makes online public spheres impossible to describe as a static entity, but the very overlap that causes that difficulty is also responsible for the blogs' rhetorical power and influence, since they are gradually expanding their visibility on the web.

The ethos of a citizen critic is one of engaged observer, since a citizen critic is not a public intellectual or expert of any kind (Eberly 1). The topics and questions that citizen critics raise in response to cultural artifacts can be viewed as representative of public opinion, at least of a limited group of people. Eberly studied writing in local newspapers rather than "elite national or expert academic magazines" (Eberly 1), but blogs offer an even more democratic sphere in which to analyze women's writing because creating a blog requires no editorial oversight and is not hampered by the limited space available to a printed medium. In the case of fashion, many of the ideas on blogs are being discussed in depth, in public, by ordinary women for the first time, since topics like body image or shopping frustrations were not usually considered newsworthy enough for print.¹

An additional benefit of using the Internet for rhetorical analysis of ethos is the ability to witness public conversations as they are taking place. In doing so, it becomes possible to understand how individual communities, united by a common interest or goal are conceptualizing the issues raised by

¹ There were a few books published on these topics. *Fashion is Spinach* by Elizabeth Hawes is a notable example. But they were not widely promoted or publicly discussed and were not often reprinted.

cultural products like fashion. This is my goal in analyzing what is an admittedly small community of writers and readers who discuss fashion from a similar perspective. They form a small but closely-knit discourse community that analyzes contemporary fashion and beauty as well as the larger community in which they find themselves (“independent fashion bloggers,” who are by no means a homogenous group).

For purposes of this study, I define ethos as a discursive role that a person inhabits in a specific community, by virtue of who they are (for example, their race/class/gender, personal history, current life circumstances, and countless other personal details) and also how they choose to enact the role in their communications. Our ethos lies mainly in our personal history, including factual details of our lives that we can’t change. James and Tita French Baumlin explain that the degree to which a rhetor fits an audience’s image of an “authority figure” in a rhetorical situation has a tremendous influence on how the rhetor’s message is received and interpreted (“On the Psychology of the *Pisteis*” 103). They focus on gender, explaining that because women do not always fit an audience’s image of an authoritative figure, their message can be easily misunderstood or ignored (103-4). Some fashion bloggers who write and use photos of themselves on their blogs and whose bodies don’t fit the thin, white and young idealized image of the fashionable woman have to deal with comments telling them to “get a tan” or “lose weight”. Thus, women’s appearance, not just their gender, can affect their ability to establish ethos, especially in conversations about fashion.

The second part of the role of ethos is how a blogger uses writing and imagery to communicate her message, and this is the part of ethos over which a she has more control. How a blogger chooses to write about her body shape, how she dresses for it, how she feels about it and how she articulates these personal details all help establish an ethos that is founded upon reflection, narrative, analysis and criticism. The use of these rhetorical strategies enables bloggers to fulfill the role they have assigned to themselves as authors of their blog.

2 TEXTUAL AND VISUAL ANALYSES

In her article “Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority,” Nedra Reynolds discusses the importance of locating one’s identity. She describes how the young Adrienne Rich and James Joyce used a similar method of geographically locating themselves by creating a list that began with their name, moved through their home address outward to their nation and ended with “The Universe” (Reynolds 325). When considering ethos as a role one plays in an online community (an online dwelling place), a similar exercise can show the different public spheres within which these writers work online. For the bloggers in this study, the outline would look like this:

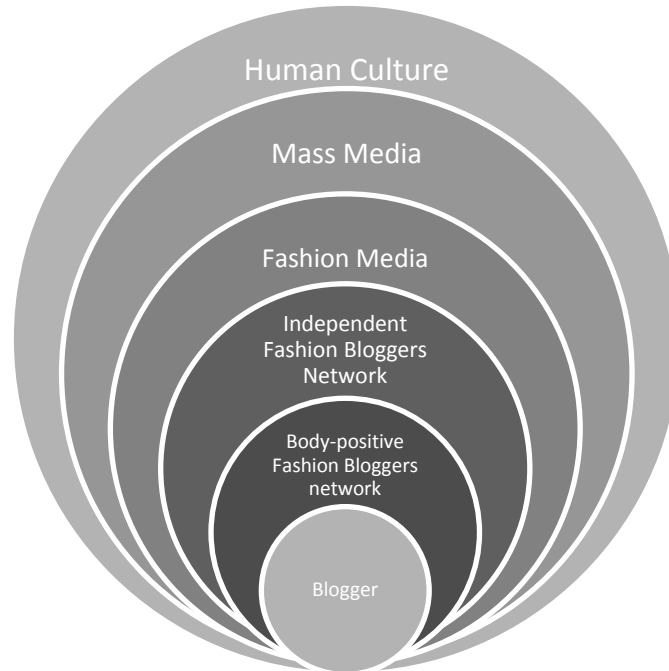


Figure 1: Diagram of bloggers' location within contemporary media

Placing my bloggers in this way shows their exact location within traditional fashion media and, by extension, the whole of mass media itself. The diagram also alludes to the relatively small influence bloggers currently have because they are nested within so many other larger public spheres of discourse. Yet bloggers’ sphere of influence is growing with the continued development of the web and

the fashion industry's growing interest in the medium, so the small circle marked "blogger" is very likely to grow and influence mainstream fashion media to a larger degree in the years to come. For now, the most important aspect of the small network of interconnected bloggers I describe in this study is that they make a direct, personal impact on their expanding readership in a way that magazines usually do not.

The discourse that develops within this small public sphere is greatly influenced both by bloggers' personal lives on one hand and by the larger cultural environment of fashion and mainstream media on the other. Fashion also shares this dual influence, since "dress is both an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it" (Entwistle, "Addressing the Body" 274). In their small network, these bloggers aim to make a better life for themselves and their readers while also working to create change in the cultural environment around them. They do this by openly discussing topics that are often ignored or manipulated by the rhetoric of the fashion industry.

2.1 The IFB Network

As shown in the diagram above, all of the blogs I studied are part of the Independent Fashion Bloggers network, which is a community site dedicated to helping both new and established fashion bloggers navigate the ethical, social and economic aspects of blogging. It includes members-only discussion boards, posts from bloggers about growing their blogs, posts from clothing brands about working with bloggers, and a large collection of articles about blogging ethics and credibility issues such as copyright and libel law, proper image attribution, maintaining positive relationships with other bloggers, and deciding how to handle gifts from sponsors. In July 2010, site creator Jennine Jacob created the "IFB Fair Compensation Manifesto" for member blogs to post on their sites as a statement of how they view their relationships with clothing brands and marketers.

The manifesto outlines the editorial responsibilities that bloggers claim on behalf of their readers, focusing on transparency of sponsored posts and defining the line between ad copy and

editorial content. These discussions about the influence of clothing brands and advertisers are an example of the conflicted nature of creativity and the rhetorical subject. Mitchell noted that because of the system around them, people who create and share images “do not always do it in the same way, nor under conditions of their own choosing” (Mitchell 11).

THE IFB FAIR COMPENSATION MANIFESTO

54 Comments 23 JULY 2010

We are Independent Fashion Bloggers. We may blog professionally. We may blog as a hobby. We have built our influence and trust with our readers over time. Our skills have enabled us to grow our communities, and provide content for our readers to enjoy.

As fashion blogging has hit the mainstream, we fashion bloggers have been approached by a growing number of companies asking for all types of coverage and advice on how to navigate the new media. **In many instances companies have enabled bloggers to provide content that they could not ordinarily cover on our own, and to which we are grateful.** It has helped the medium grow and gain more credibility. However, there have also been a growing number of proposals from companies disguised as opportunities that do not add editorial value to our blogs, nor do they present any real benefit to us at all.

We understand the difference between editorial, news and promotional content. We do believe in helping our friends, our community, each other. However, we also recognize the difference between good will and companies profiting off our work.

We believe we should be fairly compensated for promotional work, for providing material to be sold by a third party, for sharing our knowledge to companies who will profit from that said knowledge.

We believe we should be fairly compensated if we are asked to do the following things:

- ♥ Asked to write a post that is clearly promotional, NOT editorial... even if our readers might benefit
- ♥ Asked to make **specific** endorsements to increase sales and/or for promotions with specific terms
- ♥ Asked to publish specific text or specific links in a post during a specific time frame
- ♥ Asked for anything that will be sold for money ie – photos for book
- ♥ Asked for expert in-depth opinion about products or services
- ♥ Asked for contacts, specialized lists of bloggers that might help a brand

The above items do not fall into the category of gifting products for **potential** editorial coverage. When a blogger is given something with the demand to post in a specific time frame, any coverage is no longer editorial but promotional.

We value our work, our talent, our time, and our influence.

We ask for fair compensation because we believe this will help establish the medium of blogging as a whole, establish credibility, and instill a sense of professionalism in our trade. Fair compensation will provide a greater service to companies, to our readers and to ourselves in the long run.

Figure 2: IFB Fair Compensation Manifesto

The IFB Fair Compensation Manifesto helps create a supportive environment for bloggers because it lays out what bloggers expect from brands in potential collaborations. Like any advocacy organization, this network sets boundaries with commercial interests which tend to overstep editorial boundaries to get their products promoted. The language used in the manifesto is both assertive and very literal, since its aim is to tell potential sponsors what member blogs will and will not tolerate. The bolding of certain portions of the text highlight areas of particular importance while also showing appreciation for the benefits that bloggers receive from sponsors. The first bolded lines express appreciation, while the bolded words “specific” and “potential” make the details very clear for advertisers who are reading. One can assume that these two words are bolded specifically because of the degree to which advertisers try to get around these guidelines. Still, the tone remains fair and the small heart-shaped bullet points maintain the sense of fun and style the fashion industry is known for.

Fashion blogging is thus not limited to the technologies and software that make it possible; it is part of a larger system that also includes “economic mediations” like advertisers (Mitchell 213). On the IFB network site, experienced fashion bloggers contribute articles and posts to help newer bloggers navigate this aspect of their blogs. Posts on this topic include “5 Ways to Establish Credibility,” which advises bloggers to fact check like journalists and avoid slander, “Should Bloggers Adopt a Code of Ethics?” which argues that they should, and a series of posts following the FTC rulings on bloggers disclosing gifts from sponsors. Although there is a wide variety in what is termed “fashion blogger,” this community serves as a central resource from which amateur or professional bloggers can navigate the ethics and mores of blogging.

Nevertheless, like any community, the IFB network is subject to debate and disagreement. The most common topics of contention are ethics of disclosure, navigating relationships with other bloggers and the degree of fantasy or reality that is optimal in images and outfit photos. The latter has sparked debate recently, and the ensuing discussion highlights the difference between the more commercial

blogs, whose voice and imagery mimics fashion magazines, and the more critical and self-reflective blogs I study here. In both cases, the bloggers receive paid sponsorships, but the blogs I will discuss choose different topics and a different voice from their more commercial counterparts.

2.2 Contentious Topics

Significant topics that recur in discourse communities characterize the ethos of the community and of the writers in it. In *Citizen Critics*, Eberly analyzed literary public spheres in order to discover the topics that writers generated within them: “When they engaged and responded to the particular topoi of other writers—when the topoi ‘grew’—I understood those topoi as significant” (Eberly 6). Tracing the topics that circulate in a given community or public sphere is valuable because “over time, topical preferences betray standing inclinations and persistent affinities, and to know them is to know a great deal about the *ethos* of the writer” (Poulankos 93), or in this case, a small online public sphere. My project aims to trace the topics discussed on these blogs and to describe how ideas in them are conveyed through words and images.

The topics include:

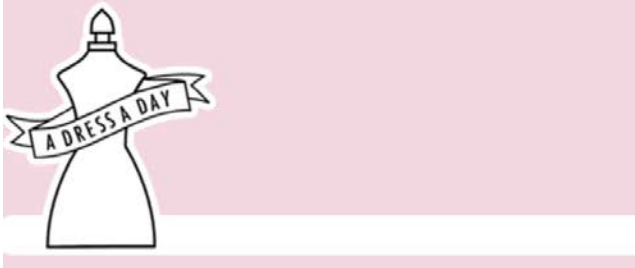
1. Clothing and the Self
2. Everyday Dress
3. Invention and Industry Critique

I have purposefully organized the topics in order from the individual to the collective because of the role that these blogs play as sites of public discourse. Elaborating on my definition of ethos as a role one plays in a community, I will explore the complex and still-evolving rhetorical messages on blogs that were all created because of some type of personal dissatisfaction, either with the writer’s own body or with the limitations of an industry that so often fails to meet its consumers’ needs. Then I will explore how the discussions moved outward to address the larger discourses of the fashion and advertising industries.

2.2.1 Clothing and the Self

Body image and the relationship between identity and clothing is a fundamental topic in all of the blogs studied, but they approach it in different ways. While some bloggers promote fashion as a means of self-expression, others ask whether the pressure to create a personal style becomes an empty dictate rather than a tool for empowerment. While some bloggers describe how attention to dress helped them heal from poor body image, eating disorders or low self-esteem, others admit to dealing with those issues by choosing not to write about them. These contrasting approaches to such a personal topic highlight how bloggers are able to “bracket some of their differences, and invent common interests” in their shared online community (Eberly 9). Entwistle notes that “by investing importance in the body, dress opens up the potential for women to use it for their own purposes” (“Addressing the Body” 286-7). Even though their approaches differ, all of these bloggers are actively bringing the topic of real women’s bodies into the public discourse about fashion and are thus helping to reorient discussions about dress so that they can begin to incorporate women’s lived experiences instead of ignoring them.

A core tenet of body-positive blogging is that women have a right to opt out of the social obligation to be attractive. This belief is often explicitly stated, but it is just as often alluded to in the almost apologetic tone of posts that provide fashion advice. The reader is always reminded that the suggestions being offered should only be followed if the reader wants to achieve the desired result. A post from Dressaday.com encapsulates both the approach and the importance of this belief: published in 2006, the post still has an active comment thread six years later, almost unheard of on a non-professional fashion and sewing blog.



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10/20/2006

You Don't Have to Be Pretty



So the other day, folks in the comments were [talking about leggings](#). I'm pretty agnostic about leggings, but the whole discussion (which centered on the fact that it can be "really" hard to look good in leggings) got me thinking about the pervasive idea that women owe it to onlookers to maintain a certain standard of decorativeness.


Figure 3: Diana Vreeland is striking, not pretty.

The lead image on this post is a photo of acclaimed fashion editor Diana Vreeland. McKean launches into an emphatic statement on the secondary status that "pretty" should play in a woman's life "several rungs down from *happy*" (McKean "You Don't Have to Be Pretty"). She quips that "Prettiness is not a rent you pay for occupying a space marked 'female'" but she also acknowledges that "You don't

owe UN-prettiness to feminism” either (McKean “You Don’t Have to be Pretty”). She describes a middle ground where women choose to decide just how pretty or attractive they want to be. This post is unusual in that nearly all of the comments on it were appreciative and expressed gratitude to the writer for sharing her thoughts. The statement that beauty is optional is a powerful component of this blogger’s ethos, and the same opinion is also foundational to the ethos of other bloggers. Although not always stated so clearly, they all support the idea that beauty should not be an obligation.

Sally McGraw of *Already Pretty* offers a slightly different take on the relationship between beauty and the body. In her post “Body, Style, Body” she asserts that dressing well is an act of empowerment that shows appreciation of one’s body. Implicit in her argument is an understanding that dress is both a creative and a rhetorical act that can influence a woman’s self-perception as well as how others perceive her. Her statement that “Your body is a part of your style” emphasizes the benefits of “knowing about” one’s body, “respecting it” and “flattering it” while the accompanying images depict curvaceous women sharing a comfortable moment by themselves (McGraw, “Body, Style, Body”).

about me



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Got a style question for me? A suggestion for *Already Pretty*? Here's how to contact me.

Body, Style, Body

by SAL on AUGUST 3, 2009 - 28 COMMENTS

Your body is part of your style. Knowing about it, respecting it, flattering it are all part of being a fashionable woman. Never let anyone convince you that learning to dress your physical form is shallow, wasteful, or unimportant.

Your style is part of your body. Since you don't walk around naked, what you wear influences how your body is perceived. Never let anyone convince you that your unclothed body is the body the world sees.

Figure 4: Style is a kind act toward one’s body.

By reiterating the natural relationship between fashion and the body (because of the simple but often overlooked fact that we wear clothes on our bodies), McGraw also emphasizes mainstream fashion's insistence on body type and proportion as an element of fashion. But rather than claim that one shape is more fashionable or desirable as mainstream fashion does, she insists that all body shapes and proportions can be beautiful. She thus points to the signifying powers of the body in fashion, while offering a new discourse to oppose the idea that only one body shape is beautiful.

There is No One Right Way to Look Great

by SAL on MAY 20, 2010 - 37 COMMENTS



Tall, thin, hourglass. This is NOT the only beautiful form.

I'm getting increasingly annoyed with style guides and experts that only ever steer women in this direction. If you WANT that, go for it! And honestly, I do want it for myself most of the time. But my body has some hourglass-y leanings naturally and it's not a huge stretch for me. Tall, thin, hourglass is a huge stretch for the vast majority of women. And it's not the only option, not the only figure with inherent beauty, sensuality, and appeal.

Allowing women to embrace and flaunt their varied body types instead of masking them furthers the goal of expanding the global definition of beauty. Convincing women that the only way to look great is to wear clothing that makes them appear as tall, thin, and hourglass-y as possible fosters feelings of shame about the figure shapes they *naturally* possess.

I don't believe that style gurus are perpetrating some giant, insidious movement designed to give women inferiority complexes. But I do believe many of them are not on board with a diverse beauty paradigm. The idea of female beauty as a vast, encompassing, diverse concept is harder to fathom, messier, new, and foreign. But it'll be the paradigm of the future, if I have anything to say about it.

There's nothing wrong with dressing to make yourself appear tall, thin, and hourglass-y. But there's nothing wrong with making *other* figure flattery concerns your priority, either.

Images courtesy (clockwise from top left) the frog's eyebrows, corazonos rojos, black dress project, annaliviaplurabelle, bloomie, SweetNee.

Figure 5: Hourglass isn't the only attractive body shape.

The tall, thin hourglass that McGraw dissects and sometimes opposes is visually represented in culture by the fashion model. Yet regardless of actual models' bodily proportions, the ideal form of a model's body is an abstract concept that, according to Barthes, allows the arbitrary statements of fashion to be made meaningful. He describes the cover girl: "her essential function is not aesthetic, it is not a question of delivering a 'beautiful body,' [...] but a 'deformed' body with a view to achieving a certain formal generality, i.e., a structure; it follows that the cover girl's body is no one's body, it is a pure form" (Barthes 259). Fashion relies on the interchange between real and abstract bodily forms for much of its rhetorical power, but by reclaiming a variety of body shapes, oppositional messages like McGraw's can oppose it. By recognizing the role that the idealized form plays in women's perception of their own bodies, McGraw offers a way out of a limiting and damaging system of signification.

Calling attention to and then debunking the presence or power of fashion's idealized form is a rhetorical strategy used by most of the bloggers I analyze. In a guest post written for McGraw's Body Image Warrior Week project, DeeDee Robinson's guest post "The Ideal Form of Me, or, How Plato Turned Me into a Body Image Blogger" focuses explicitly on the idealized female form. Her explanation of the relationship between clothing and body image recalls Barthes' ideas of the signified body:

[...] our outfits occupy the narrow frontier separating our real, physical selves from our mental images of ourselves. So you can talk about the clothes all you want, but as soon as you bring up why you chose them, what you loved or hated about them or how they made you feel, you're talking about body image (Robinson, "Guest Post: The Ideal Form of Me").

Referencing Plato's theory of forms, Robinson ponders the process of ignoring one's real body in favor of an idealized form. After outlining the concept of Forms, Robinson goes on to explain how they are damaging when women internalize them and use them to relate to themselves. She explains, "the characteristics I use to recognize myself aren't necessarily characteristic of the real me" (Robinson, "Guest Post: The Ideal Form of Me"). Instead she realizes she has long been judging herself "based on some other person's attributes" that she feels she should embody even though they are physically impossible for her. Realizing that she is falling short of an idealized conception of her body that she has

internalized, she knows that she must find a way to “acknowledge the irrationality of the Ideal Form” and accept her real form the way it is. But it’s a constant struggle to change the image of herself that she has maintained for so long. This body acceptance process parallels the larger struggle in our culture to relate to all images (not just fashion) in a way that does not reproduce Plato’s cave and is instead accepting of the state of the real world. As Barbara Stafford asks, “Will we ever dig ourselves out of Plato’s irrational shadow realm?” (Stafford 216).

The posts above explore the destructiveness of ideal forms to women who do not possess them. But what about the models who work in the fashion industry because they do happen to possess some of the characteristics of the idealized body? Although the circulation of images in culture helps define a trend or look, it is disingenuous to treat images of models as if there were not a real woman behind the picture (Hollander 27). As real women whose bodies signify an ideal form, models often find themselves in the role of “offending image” since they are a living embodiment of the beauty ideal (Mitchell 15). As “symbols of forms of life that are feared and despised” (Mitchell 15), fashion models are attacked as not being “real women” and are often accused of triggering or promoting eating disorders. The model thus faces a double bind: the work she does produces imagery that feeds the dominant beauty ideal, but she is at the same time judged according to it and found lacking just as ordinary women are.

A former model who goes by username “The Waves” (a reference to Virginia Woolf’s novel) shared her thoughts and experiences of modeling in a guest post on *Already Pretty*, where a number of readers admitted to having never considered what the life and feelings of a model were actually like. In her post, this blogger explains that her dissatisfaction with her body is what prompted her to become a model. Feeling “freakish” for being so tall and thin, she found it comforting to work in an environment that temporarily accepted her unique form. By humanizing models, whose feelings and lives are often ignored, and showing how they are subject to the same types of body shame that ordinary women are, *The Waves* helps to shatter the myth of the ideal body as attainable (“Guest Post: On Modeling”).



When I hear people say that models are ugly, disgustingly thin, unhealthy and that they promote eating disorders, I can't help but take it personally. Women have been made to feel bad about their bodies for centuries, and I refuse to believe it is "the other woman's" fault. I am not going to take the blame, and neither is my body. During my years of modeling, I got to know dozens and dozens of young models, and they are so much more than their figures. Even if models seem to be "free game" for criticism due to the apparent superficiality of their work, they are real young women. They are people who have lives to live. They have boyfriends. They fight with their parents. They struggle with what they want to do in the future. They have dreams outside the world of modeling. They have body issues just like every young woman does, and they hurt. Models hear so much criticism because of the nature of their work, that it seems profoundly unfair to me for them to be accused of giving a bad example to young girls worldwide. During my modeling career I met some models who had issues with eating, but I never met a single model who promoted eating disorders. If there is a body image they have time to be concerned about, it is their own. If anything, the direct public slander of young models' bodies makes them turn inward even more; They are more inclined to stay in their comfort zone, in the model bubble, for as long as the society around them is only interested in telling them how unnatural and unwomanly they are.

Figure 6: Models are people too.

On her own blog, *No Signposts in the Sea*, The Waves deconstructs many different aspects of fashion and style. The outfit images that she posts of herself are completely different from her fashion photos, thus emphasizing her refusal to participate in the rhetoric and imagery of mainstream fashion. Even though she has first-hand experience and knowledge of how to create glamorous photos, she refrains from doing so. Like most of the other bloggers, she maintains a healthy skepticism about the overall project of style blogging, what it means and just how important it is (or isn't). In a two part post titled "On personal style, blogging, and our narratives" she explores the relationship between clothing

and identity. She begins by recalling her initial goals in starting a blog: “I felt like I needed to get my head around what I really thought about fashion, personal style, shopping and body image” (“On Personal Style”). With this aim in mind, she began by using blogging as a learning process, but she has more recently admitted that “in some ways, blogging has made me completely over-think the meaning of the clothes I wear” (“On Personal Style”). She has “become suspicious of the idea that we should *actively* use fashion and clothes to express ourselves and our personalities in the first place.” She wonders “Do we really need to establish particular narratives about our clothes to know who we are?”. The question is valid and shows a writer engaged in self-reflection and filled with doubt. Without saying so specifically, she seems to be aware that “what clothes may well express could be no more than a mood, whim or temporary need, largely unrelated to the basic personality, let alone the social identity, of the wearer” (Campbell 165). The overall tone of this post is extremely skeptical of fashion blogging as a whole, and it ends with the pessimistic admission of the writer that “The endless personal style jargon isn't doing it for me anymore” (“On Personal Style”).

In part two, she reveals that what prompted her thoughts in part one was some time she'd spent reading blogs she doesn't normally follow, blogs from “the other side” of the fashion blogosphere that take a less critical approach to fashion (“On Personal Style, part 2”). Because they use highly stylized photography and employ many of the same rhetorical conventions as fashion magazines (such as hiking in high heels or being photographed in scenic landscapes), she found them to be empty and repetitive. But after thinking more about what she read, she describes in part two how comparing her voice to others actually helps her define her style and topical priorities and get motivated to write again. By the end of part two, she confirms the positive aspects of all types of fashion blogs, even if they fill different niches and speak to different audiences.

The images used in this second post mimic the change of opinion that she goes through, where the position of her head reflects the direction of her thoughts. The first image, in which she looks off to

the side, mirrors her explanation about the blogs she'd been reading. She'd been looking away from her own writing process by spending time reading unfamiliar blogs. Her far off gaze matches the tone of her writing, as she describes reading and thinking about blogs she doesn't normally follow.

On personal style, blogging, and our narratives,
part 2



I have a confession to make. Both before and after my last week's post on style blogging and style narratives I have spent a good amount of time browsing through blogs and style websites that I don't normally follow. I do that every once in a while,

Figure 7: Looking outside herself

The second photo is similarly posed and she continues to elaborate on what she thought about while reading the other blogs.

The reality gets to be a little bit more complicated though. When a bunch of people share their narratives, in the words of Katie (whose comment I am sort of butchering here a little), we “[let our] observations of style bloggers influence [our] interpretation of [ourselves], which in turn will influence others’ observations of [us, and we] lock [ourselves] in a tension in which [we] are a conduit, not a result.” This can be a problem, because like I wrote last week, the narratives start to feel repetitive and meaningless at times, and I, for one, occasionally feel completely lost in the framework of too much inspiration and too many surfaces to reflect upon.



Figure 8: Sideways glance

In the third image, however, she is looking downward in self-reflection. Here, the narrative has turned inward as well, as she relates an “eye-opener” comment and the ideas it raised for her. Below the image, she has come to a new conclusion through self-reflection.

things, too. Elly's comment was an eye-opener for me last week: "I don't feel that those "wanna-be" stories [Miu-Miu-in-the-woods-type blogs] are necessarily less true to ourselves or hinder our trying to understand our self-identity stories. [...] I see that the kind of art, the stories we choose to create, reveal powerful information about ourselves."



This means, then, that all narratives matter, despite how fictional they might be. Like *Cynthia* wrote in her comment, "any time a deliberately self-reflective person sits down to construct some kind of narrative about themselves, it becomes like art and not quite like reality." All narratives are fictional, to some extent, because fiction is in their nature. And there is nothing wrong with that. They still provide us a way to understand the human experience, or in the case of style blogging, the experience of being a woman in postmodern times attracted to beautiful things, and surrounded by a culture that encourages, to use *Jesse.anne.o's* brilliant term, "consumption unexamined".

Figure 9: Looking down in contemplation

Finally, by the time the reader scrolls down to the last image, we see the writer looking up, while the narrative has moved toward a more positive and affirming perspective on blogging.



In this sense, style blogs are very valuable. Whether we look at narratives of completely mindless spending and fashion-victim-ity, or narratives that portray our attempts to keep ourselves in check, the story is what matters. Whether we blog in order to simplify our cluttered lives, to parade our weekly fashion or thrift fix, to seek rational solutions to our wardrobe dilemmas, or to share our thoughts on clothes and style, I think we all do it to share our style narratives with each other. In the community that I actively engage in, we support each other when someone has decided to go on a shopping ban, we share our ideas about responsible consuming, and we help each other feel good about ourselves. We put our own faces out there because it is not just about the clothes; it is about real people coming together and sharing their narratives. For too long women's interest in clothing and style has been labeled superficial and frivolous, and too many times we've all heard the claim that style bloggers are only looking for admiration or approval.

Figure 10: Looking up, carefully

This final image visually summarizes the post's conclusion. Having acknowledged that the sheer number of both critical and uncritical personal fashion narratives can be overwhelming, she depicts herself in the last photo shading her eyes while maintaining an upward gaze. Concluding the post, she advocates an open mind, but emphasizes that one should actively choose which narratives to take in:

Our style narratives offer a small glimpse of what can be seen with the naked eye and the brain that guides that eye. At the end of the day, we long to relate to narratives that somehow touch us, and we long to make narratives that help us understand our own behavior. This is what I want to channel to everyone out there, both as a blogger as well as a part of the audience ("On Personal Style, part 2").

In this two-part post, the writer traced her thoughts and feelings and portrayed them to her audience as an evolving process of discovery. Reflecting and changing one's mind is a writing strategy commonly found in this network of bloggers. Autumn Whitefield-Madrano used this technique in a post about body image in which she explained that she prefers to explore beauty work and its cultural meanings, rather than write of the body. As she writes, she explains why body image is a difficult subject for her to write about and relates her confusion at being called a body image blogger. As the narrative progresses, she considers why she is categorized that way and ultimately concludes that she is a body image writer after all. The image on this post summarizes her idea.

This post comes from Autumn Whitefield-Madrano of *The Beheld*. I always set aside a chunk of time to read Autumn's cerebral, incisive posts because they always force me to think with all of my brain. Her musings on beauty, sociology, and culture are consistently mindblowing, in the best possible way. Read on for Autumn's contribution to Body Image Warrior Week:



I don't write about body image.

I'll write about beauty, any day of the week. I'll write about what goes on from the neck up; I'll cover the myth of men preferring long hair, or why I wear makeup, or Gen-X beauty trends. And of course every so often bodies worm their way in: One can hardly talk about the annoyances of "dress your figure" pages in magazines without talking about figures, after all.

Figure 11: Beauty from the neck up: a fallacy.

The eyes in the photo simultaneously display the makeup that is her preferred topic of analysis, but only at the expense of her sight, since the eyes in the picture are closed. The photo is primarily taken up with hair, skin and makeup and the mouth is cut out of the frame. The closed eyes and absence of the mouth thus depict Whitefield-Madrano's conclusion that writing only "from the neck up" will prevent her from understanding the complete picture of "the issues of visibility, feminine performance, and beauty that are at the core of what I try to deconstruct" ("Body Image Warrior Week").

2.2.2 Everyday Dress

The ideal singular body shape is not just an abstraction, however. It is also a reality in the form of fitting models who are used to size women's clothing (Clifford). To design and size their clothing lines, designers use fitting models to determine the proportions for each garment. The varieties of real women's bodies can't be accounted for by using a single woman as a model, so mass-produced clothing

is often ill-fitting. The frustrations of fit are a frequent topic of discussion on the blogs. Suggestions for dealing with bad fit include having clothing tailored or shopping in thrift stores to find garments that are cut differently from those that are currently being mass-produced. Additionally, clothing sizes have become larger in recent years due to vanity sizing. The New York Times has reported on the lack of standardization in sizing, explaining that larger sizes are being labeled with smaller numbers in order to match the median body size of the population, which is growing larger (Clifford).

Many of the most popular fashion bloggers ignore or gloss over fit issues. They align themselves closely with the fashion industry and thus they rarely address the industry's failures or missteps. Instead, their style advice focuses on creating outfits for the most visual appeal or impact. By contrast, body positive fashion bloggers offer tips on how to judge proper fit, how to decide when to tailor and how to make less-than-perfect garments look better ("Faking Fit"). The advice is generally given with sympathy and commiseration, as the blogger admits to sharing the frustration of her readers. She speaks to them as a fellow shopper, not as an authoritative expert, as most fashion magazines do.

Bloggers also frequently discuss "style journeys," a term used to connote an ongoing learning process with regard to style. This self-reflective approach is one that has also been conceptualized by fashion theorists. JoAnn Entwistle asserts that "getting dressed is an ongoing practice, requiring knowledge, techniques and skills, from learning how to tie our shoelaces and do up our buttons as children, to understanding about colours (*sic*), textures and fabrics and how to weave them together to suit our bodies and our lives" ("Addressing the Body" 274). The emphasis on style as a personal process reveals that fashion's characteristic changes do not always arise from within the fashion system—they are also created by real women experimenting, reflecting and studying the aesthetics and the roles of clothing in their own lives.

In fact, many current trends arose out of fashion blogs, and have even been critiqued by other fashion blogs. On her blog *Wardrobe Oxygen*, Alison Gary compiled a list of frequent blogger styles that

include layering, belting, wearing brightly-colored tights, wearing shorts with tights in winter, and pairing unexpected garments ("Blogger Fashion Trends"). She then explained why each of these techniques might not work for everyone. Although her post critiqued some very popular style blogs, she kept the tone friendly by reiterating how much she enjoys the blogs because they show "real women wearing real clothing from off the rack" ("Blogger Fashion Trends"). Her critique was addressed to an audience of women who are unable to achieve the same effects that the bloggers do and her implicit goal was to be supportive of women who can't make certain trends work for them, not to criticize other blogs. There were no angry comments in response to the post, and there is no evidence of problems caused to Gary's online relationships. Her blog continues to be popular with her readers and with other bloggers, despite (or even because of) her polite critique.

Because garments can alter the perceived shape of the body, figure flattery techniques are a frequent topic in mainstream fashion magazines as well. Barthes recognized decades ago that fashion rhetoric relies heavily on the ability of clothing to "lengthen, fill out, reduce, enlarge, take in, refine" the body's shape so that the ideal body can still be meaningfully signified to readers (260). The implication is that purchasing the right clothes can make one's body look closer to the ideal. In magazines, this advice is spoken with an authoritative voice that "presents itself immediately as Law" (Barthes 269) and can only be differentiated from similar advice in blogs by the ethos of the writer and the supportive "dwelling place" she has created on her blog.

As shown in these examples, the purpose of fashion advice on the blogs is not just to share experiences and advice, but to explore fashion as "the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting place of the private and the public" both in dressing and in writing (Entwistle, "Addressing the Body" 274). In addition to fit advice, issues of public and private dress are often discussed, with bloggers like Sally McGraw and Autumn Whitefield-Madrano proclaiming the unsuitability of wearing pajamas in public ("Sartorial Slippery Slopes", "The Privacy Settings of

Pajamas”). Other posts that acknowledge the public-private aspect of clothing include McGraw’s advice on “dressing older” for women who look young and find it negatively impacts them professionally (“Dressing to Look Older”) and suggestions for making “business casual” more fun (Singer). The lively discussions and ethos of public awareness in these conversations harkens back to Sennett’s lament on the “collapse of separate public and private spheres” which he argues has “deprived human beings of a realm in which to present selves different from their private, perhaps ‘authentic’” selves (Sennett qtd. in Eberly 25). Indeed, Whitefield-Madrano’s “The Privacy Settings of Pajamas” addresses precisely this topic as she critiques the recent teen trend of wearing pajamas in public. Her overall message is much more optimistic than Sennett’s, however, because she gives teens credit for navigating the pressures of public-private identity construction that have been complicated by the advent of the web and social media.

With these discussions about appropriateness of dress for a variety of public situations, these bloggers are reviving the concept of a public persona as outlined by Sennett. This persona is not a repression or misrepresentation of one’s authentic self, but is simply as a presentation of a public self that allows the private self to retain the intimacy of relative seclusion. The public persona that is communicated on blogs shows how enacting, writing and photographing the process of dress is an inherently public, and thus rhetorical, act. It is not the garments, but the process of wearing and then communicating them that constitute fashion as rhetorical messages. The way in which those messages are told through words and imagery constitute a blogger’s ethos, or the role they take on when blogging.

Photography plays a crucial part in establishing a blogger’s ethos, because it often visualizes the opinions that she has toward fashion and clothes. Most fashion magazine photography (and the work of bloggers who aspire to join the industry) reflects the “‘creativity’ of innovative couture design” with images that rely heavily on “blurred photographic” methods that obscure both the model’s body and

the clothing being advertised (Brookes 520). By contrast, many bloggers use more realistic imagery. The now-common “daily outfit photo” is used by all types of fashion bloggers and provides a way to contrast the ethos of different spheres of fashion discourse by analyzing their imagery. The goal for an outfit photo can be either fantasy or practicality, depending on the style of the blogger. Many professional fashion bloggers use heavily-enhanced images and scenic settings to show of an outfit. However, the daily outfit photo is designed for practical purposes on many blogs, to show what an outfit looks like when and where it is actually worn. The blogger usually comments about how she devised the look, what she likes or doesn’t like about it, and how it represents specific figure-flattering techniques (or fails to).

The screenshot below, from the blog *Wardrobe Oxygen*, comments on the difference between how clothes look in photographs and how they look in real life. Although Gary was disappointed by how she looked in these photos, she is able to disconnect emotionally from the image and focus instead on how good the outfit made her feel while she was wearing it. She wonders how outfits that are shown in outfit photos would actually look on “the person walking and standing in line at the bank and sitting at their desk” and she acknowledges that even though photos change how clothes look on the body, she still feels “pretty darn sassy in real life (*and isn't real life what matters anyway?*)” (Gary, “Wednesday”). The ease with which she separates her lived experience from the image of it shows pragmatism as well as positive body image, two traits that characterize the ethos of these fashion bloggers.



Jacket - Limited (*similar*)
Scoop tee - LOFT (*similar*)
Pants - Talbots
Shoes - Target
Bracelet - Anthropologie (*similar*)
Clutch - HOBLO "Dove"

Today I put this outfit together and felt super sassy. Came downstairs, my husband said he really liked it and couldn't believe it but liked the leopard shoes with these pants. On the Metro, two women asked me where I got my pants, and a coworker said she adored this look. Then I looked at the pictures on the memory card... and don't feel as though they properly translate the ensemble.

At first I got upset - why didn't my husband notice my jacket all hiked up into my armpits? The flat hair? I thought these pants were cute but in these pictures they look strange and dumpy. I never should have bought them. But then I realized... a blog photograph doesn't truly express an outfit. I often see outfits on blogs that look amazing, but wonder if they would look just as great in real life, the person walking and standing in line at the bank and sitting at their desk. So I may not be pleased with the way this outfit looks in these pictures, I still feel pretty darn sassy in real life (*and isn't real life what matters anyway?*).

Figure 12: Real life is what matters

Yet body-positive bloggers do use some creative photo editing techniques in outfit photos, and the degree of reality versus creativity they express has recently become an active topic of discussion in the fashion blogosphere. Many of the bloggers who take a more critical stance toward the fashion and apparel industries have begun to overtly differentiate their work from more highly-trafficked bloggers who attend fashion shows, offer little critique and use highly-stylized imagery that does not reflect women's real lives. The debate focuses on the degree to which fashion blogging has become "increasingly detached from reality" in recent years (Robinson, "Reality"). While the bloggers in my study have retained and even increased their attention to body image and the rhetorical powers of dress, the fashion industry has discovered that fashion bloggers are useful for marketing and has built relationships with many of them. The discussion about the portrayal of "reality" on blogs is a response to this change, but there is no consensus on just how "real" the images on a blog should be. For some bloggers, reality means "I actually wore these clothes all day" while for others it might only mean providing a bit more context around their beautiful, heavily-enhanced photos.

Two recent posts on this topic show these variations of opinion. In her post "Reality versus creativity in fashion blogging" JoAnn Anderson of *Sidewalk Chic* responds to recent critiques that blogs are becoming too much like fashion magazines in their heavily-edited photography and lack of thoughtful writing. In reflecting on her photography techniques, she explains that the blog is an outlet for creative expression that, for her, does not necessarily need to reflect reality. Creative composition of the photos and outfits allows her to be creative in ways that she can't in other areas of her life (Anderson, "Reality versus creativity"). She admits that blogging can push a writer to take a more fantasy-oriented approach in the creation of her images: "When I started to really get into blogging, things changed. The locations had to be better. The clothes, more fantastical and more vintage-y. The poses, more pose-y" (Anderson, "Reality versus creativity"). In reconsidering her approach based on the

current debate, she decides not to change her photography methods, but to provide more explanation of her photos and outfits.

This might have been the most long-winded way of saying that I only wore this outfit for an hour because it was way too cold.

Anyways, I am curious: **What is important to you when you blog -- depicting reality or a sense of creativity, or both? Is authenticity an important factor when you read a blog?**



Figure 13: *Sidewalk Chic*, on location.

The comments in response to this post took different sides, as some readers said they read her blog purely for fantasy and inspiration, while others prefer realism.

There's a reason I love style blogs so much more than fashion magazines. Real people in their own real clothes are so much more fascinating. The bloggers I follow give some sense of who they are, and I love viewing the variety of personalities and how they express themselves through the clothes they choose. Do the bloggers represent 100% reality of who they are? Probably not. Do we always show our true selves all the time in public anyway? ("Reality versus creativity in fashion blogging").

This comment reflects the public/private debate and links that debate to a writer's ethos. Style blogs are not autobiographies, so the decision on how much of one's life and everyday outfits to share is a rhetorical one. Unlike Anderson, bloggers who photograph their outfits at the end of a long workday, wrinkles and all, are presenting a very different public message about their clothing and identity than blogs that take more creative license. For this reason, it is helpful to compare the imagery from *Sidewalk Chic* above to the post that inspired it.

Franca Eirich's "On reality and different approaches to fashion blogging" on her blog *Oranges and Apples* dissects the extent to which blogs can be authentic or convey reality. She admits to "the frustration of seeing all these model-pretty 22 year old girls who can make a living out of blogging," but in considering the issue, doesn't find that "reality" has much to do with that frustration. Instead, she focuses on the different lifestyles led by different bloggers and asserts that her blog does not convey reality either. This statement is significant because many of her readers comment that they appreciate her blog precisely because it is grounded in the everyday. How then does she claim that she doesn't portray reality? She does this by stating that dress is a public persona that one puts on. Of her blog, Eirich states "it's edited life, of course, but it's still life" ("On Reality"). In other words, her approach falls somewhere in between contrived fantasy (in which outfits are created purely for show) and authentic reality (where a blogger confesses intimate details about her life). She admits to "struggling to just about keep my life on track" while also pointing out that she purposefully doesn't share those struggles on the blog ("On Reality").

Readers, however, respond primarily to how her clothing represents everyday life by depicting wearable outfits. The sequence of images Eirich created to match this post reflect her stated position on authenticity or "reality," but they also hint at the aspects of her self-presentation that readers interpret as "everyday" fashion. Inspired by images used on another blog, Eirich appropriated the method to create a more visually-interesting set of images that make up for the "ordinary" outfit she was posting

about (Eirich, “On Reality”). The images are whimsical and fun because of the editing technique, but what has *not* been edited out makes the biggest statement. In looking closely at the images, one notices visible wrinkles in her shirt, a sign (like the rags of Aristotle’s sufferers) that she has actually worn the shirt all day. The cuffs of her pants are rolled haphazardly and are slightly wrinkled as well; the arm of her coat in the middle photo is inside out for no apparent reason.

On reality and different approaches to fashion blogging

By FRANCA on JANUARY 30, 2012



I wore this outfit to work on a Friday. I haven't shown this [£1 blazer](#) on the blog yet, so I wore the same thing again on the Saturday (with a different long sleeve tee underneath). I also thought it would be good to show a more 'ordinary' outfit, lest anyone thinks I spend every day flouncing about in vintage dresses. Not that I think anyone thinks that (?).

Figure 14: Twins and triplets

Whether the lack of editing on her clothing and figure was intentional or not, the result is a set of images with a specific rhetorical power of persuasion and an ethos of “the everyday” that is also reflected in the tone and topics of her writing. By “aiming for something in between daily documentation and aspirational fantasy” she highlights the particular editorial niche that many of the blogs in my study fill (Eirich, “On Reality”). They navigate the line between reality and artifice, but there is something “real” about the way they write, dress and use imagery that is more complex than the real versus artificial binary allows. By contrast, the photo from *Sidewalk Chic* above is picturesque and essentially flawless, in keeping with more fantasy-oriented, creative approach.

Thus, there are two different meanings of “real” in relation to fashion blogging – it can mean sharing intimate details about one’s personal life, such as one blogger’s post about her leukemia (“Ten Years of Life”) or it can relate specifically to how a blogger wears, uses and photographs her clothing. Yet both approaches have a similar rhetorical effect: bringing everyday life into a public discourse about fashion. Because the rhetoric of the fashion media doesn’t concern itself with women’s real lives, blogs that discuss these issues openly provide a new context for fashion, where women can define and create beauty on their own terms through writing, reading and community engagement.

This rhetorical approach makes the writing and imagery of everyday dress a type of “reverse discourse” in which women’s lived experience of dressing their bodies contradicts the dominant messages both of the fashion industry and the larger cultural stereotype of the fashion victim (Entwistle, “Addressing the Body” 286). By promoting the idea that dress “is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them” and therefore “cannot be separated from the living, breathing, moving body,” these bloggers have created an environment that helps reunite inner and outer beauty for women who have suffered from poor body image, eating disorders and other emotional difficulties (Entwistle, “Addressing the Body” 274). Instead of opposing fashion, they oppose the current rhetoric fashion uses by “choosing items to meet their emotional needs” (Campbell 165)

with clothes in their own way. Although empowering, this rhetorical act means that they “are unlikely to be abiding by the standardized requirements of a social code” (Campbell 165) like the fashion system and thus, the next logical step is to critique the system for failing to meet so many women’s needs.

2.2.3 Invention and Critique

Realizing that dress is “the outcome of *practices* which are socially constituted but put into effect by the individual,” these bloggers set out to engage with the social and economic entities that determine what women can choose to wear: the advertising and apparel manufacturing industries (Entwistle, “Addressing the Body” 277). They often remind readers that one’s aesthetic decisions are heavily informed by social convention. Fashion theorists Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher explain that the “form of a society’s language of personal adornment depends upon environmental resources, technical developments, and cultural standards for judging what is fine or beautiful” (Roach and Eicher 109). Understanding the larger forces that determine what women wear is a crucial rhetorical tactic that involves both engagement with the industry as well as critique of it.

As explained in the previous chapter, fit is an ongoing topic of discussion. Although there are many posts that criticize the apparel industry’s lack of attention to sizing problems, bloggers have started more recently to create their own solutions to the problem of fit. In one of her weekly link roundups, Sally McGraw of *Already Pretty* featured a post from a tech blogger who designed a web application that helps women determine what size they are in different brands. Using manufacturers’ published measurements, Anna Powell-Smith created an interactive program in which women can enter their bust, waist and hip measurements and then click and drag lines on a graph to see where they fit on the sizing scale. Users can enter their measurements in either metric or imperial units and the sizing suggestions are customized for different types of garments to show how sizes differ between, for example, shirts and dresses. This application shows how topics about fashion can lead directly to the process of rhetorical invention and that the outcome may be primarily visual or technical, rather than

verbal, in nature. Much like practical fashion advice, this program provides a technical solution to a problem through an emphasis on shared frustration and problem-solving.

darkgreener

fashion

Introducing... What Size Am I

Posted by anna on Jan 19, 2012 in fashion, visualisation | No Comments

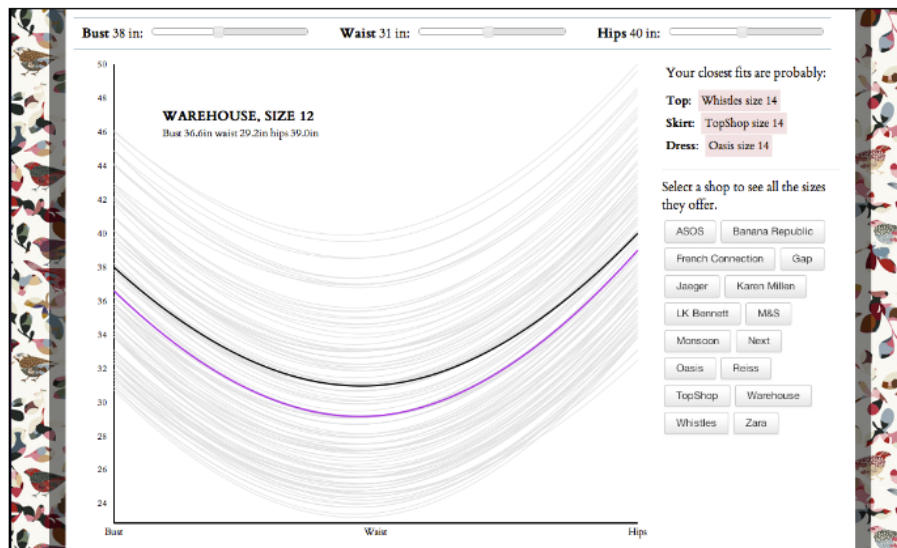
For many women, there are few things more frustrating than trying on clothes. To put it in terms that my (mostly male) coder friends will understand: debugging CSS doesn't come close to the blood-boiling irritation of trying to work out whether you are a size 8, a size 10, or *both*. Because, yes, you can be one size for tops and another for skirts, all in the same shop.

It may surprise men reading this to learn that there is no agreement on what makes a size 10. Shops differ. A *lot*. When I am shopping on the high street, I take each item into the changing room in two or three different sizes. When shopping online, I'm sure you can see that this is even more of a problem.

Anyway, here is my attempt to help make sizing a bit easier for female customers, inspired by [this New York Times article](#) about the madness. The Times pointed out the problem, but they didn't turn it into a solution – that's what I've tried to do here, having noticed that most stores do publish their own size details online.

And so: presenting "What Size Am I?", a web app to help women in the UK and the US find clothes that fit.

Here is a screenshot:



As a female hacker, this combines two of my main interests in life: clothes and nice tech. If you're using a modern browser with SVG support, you should be able to enter your bust, waist and hip measurements in inches or cm, and see an interactive graph of where you fit, from roomy Jaeger to tiny Reiss. If you're using IE8 or below, you'll just see a table (sorry IE-using folks).

Figure 15: Fashion tech demystifies sizing standards

Nevertheless, community engagement often does rely on verbal communication and analysis of visual texts. As communities around a particular blogger grow, it becomes necessary for the site to grow and offer more means of communication. Two blogs, *Alterations Needed* and *YouLookFab*, began as personal blogs and expanded to include forums for the audience to have their own conversations. Forums represent the literal power of ethos as a dwelling place, since they provide a place that an audience can come to have in-depth discussions on a wide variety of fashion topics. The petite community that developed around *Alterations Needed* even inspired the blog's author to create a new website focused exclusively on fit and composed of reader's snapshots. She explains,

The petite community, instead of moaning and complaining about the injustices of sizing, have come together and acted in a collective mindset of helping others...and I love it!

Watching what the petite community was doing organically, sparked an idea. What if we could take this idea of community sourced clothing reviews, and put it on a platform that could help women of any shape and size ("Finding the Right Fit").

This post was an introduction of her new project, fitreview.com, that allows readers to upload photographs of themselves trying on clothes in stores to share recommendations and advice. Because this blogger created her blog to meet both a personal and a social need, she was able to build a community around it that then led to additional projects based in the same ethos of community, optimism and helpfulness.

The same optimistic tone characterizes discussions on the forum of *YouLookFab*. Most discussion threads are started by readers posting an image of an outfit for others to weigh in on, and unlike many discussion boards on the internet, the tone is always positive and upbeat rather than critical. The women who frequent the forum even meet in various cities to socialize and these events are turned into blog posts by Cox. Keeping women's relationships a frequent topic on the blog reinforces the community-oriented nature of the site.

Part of the forum on *YouLookFab* is dedicated to a book club where readers congregate and discuss books (and occasionally films) related to fashion history, style advice, memoirs and women's literature. Some of the books appear to be prompted by current events, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* in the wake of recent debates around birth control. The book club not only provides the chance to learn more about the fashion industry, but also to communicate about women's issues more generally.

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Welcome to the YLF Book Club! We post the schedule of upcoming titles on this page. We also have a [category of the YLF forum dedicated to book club discussions](#), and each time a title goes live we'll start a conversation over there with some initial thoughts to get things going. There are, of course, many different aspects to every book and movie, so please feel free to start your own discussions on specific topics about the active title.

[Inge](#) runs YLF Books and also coordinates the book club. If you have any questions about the book club then please get in touch with her using the YLF private messaging feature. If you can't use private messaging, then feel free to use the [contact form](#).

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Figure 16: The *YouLookFab* book club landing page

While some internet commentators have referred to fashion and women's blogs as "the slumber parties of the internet" (Fischer), the fact that heavy and light subject matter can be discussed within the same community shows that women are making the same types of personal connections online that they often make in person. Whitefield-Madrano has commented on this aspect of women's blogs as well, saying "just as silliness coexists alongside our more meaningful concerns, fluffy pieces can comfortably coexist alongside essays on healing from sexual assault. (In fact, for some of us, the fluff was a way to heal)" ("On Ladyblogging"). Thus, these communities serve as online dwelling places where communities of readers dissect fashion and beauty in both their fun and serious incarnations. The establishment and maintenance of these communities is a rhetorical act that cuts away at the myth that an interest in fashion signifies anti-intellectualism or superficiality.

Reading about the history and larger cultural aspects of fashion provides a wealth of knowledge from which both bloggers and readers can more thoughtfully critique the fashion system and apparel industry. One piece of particularly insightful analysis is Franca Eirich's series of posts about the book *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles* by Kate Fletcher. She begins with a definitional stasis that attempts to define exactly what is meant by sustainable fashion. She writes that "a concern for sustainability and ethics is becoming ever more mainstream, but it just feels to me that we are so concerned with finding solutions that we never really recognise [*sic*] or define what the problem actually is" (Eirich, "Sustainability"). She explains that the two solutions most often proposed—buying fewer clothes and always buying used—are not scalable solutions to the nebulous problem of the unsustainability of mass clothing production. Summarizing the book, she offers a more nuanced definition of "sustainable fashion" that makes a crucial distinction between the practical function of clothing versus its role in self-identity. In part two of the three-part series, she also explains to readers what one example of a solution might be:

For example, a staple item such as a plain shirt (or underwear) is worn regularly and washed a lot over its life, meaning that the energy used to launder it eventually dwarfs the energy used to produce it. In contrast, for a cheap party top that is worn only a handful of times before it disappears in the back of the wardrobe, the energy use is all in the production (Eirich, "Sustainability part 2").

The clothing manufacturing process is a topic that is rarely discussed or shown in fashion magazines unless it's in regard to a labor or sweat shop scandal. However, Angie Cox of *YouLookFab* documented a Karen Kane factory tour for her readers, explaining each process that takes place and commenting on the technologies used to accomplish certain tasks. As a personal stylist, she has a closer relationship to the fashion industry than most of the other bloggers do, so she uses her connection with brands to give her readers a glimpse of how clothing production works. In the series of posts about her tour, she provides numerous pictures that detail the steps taken to produce a garment and she describes the tasks of several of the workers. To humanize this site of mass production and make it more relatable to readers, she points out the parts of the process that are still done by hand, such as arranging pattern pieces to prevent fabric wastage (Cox, "Clothing Production").



Once the patterns are graded, the information is loaded onto a computer where it's an absolute skill to lay out the pattern pieces so that there is minimum fabric wastage. The lovely gentleman behind this computer plays around with many, many pattern laying configurations until he has the optimum solution. So essentially this process is still done by hand. Computers do NOT work out the best pattern lay. Isn't that amazing?



At last we're ready to cut the fabric! The cutting tables take up almost the entire length of the factory floor. The fabric is unrolled and layered across the length of the tables. It stretches as it's unrolled, so it has to "rest and recover" for a couple of days before it sees the blades of a cutter.

The layers of fabric are heavy, so when the time comes to feed it through the cutter, air blows through little holes on the cutting table to assist movement.

A template of the pattern lay is fed into a Gerber Cutter, an enormous computer operated machine that moves on tracks across the factory floor. It moves from one cutting table to the next, cutting out pattern pieces through hundreds of layers of fabric. But you know how it goes, all machines break down, and when that happens, out comes the electric hand cutter that you see in the bottom corner of the above photo. Everything has a contingency plan.



In some instances, fabric has to be cut *completely by hand*, which these fabulous ladies are doing with shearing fabric. You are not allowed to cut the hair of shearing fabric, just the backing, so no fancy Gerber cutter here. It's all controlled by the human hand. The masks are to prevent fabric fluff from irritating nasal passages.

Figure 17: A first-hand look at clothing manufacturing

Yet however optimistic and solution-oriented bloggers may be about clothing production and sizing issues, they remain razor-sharp in their critiques of the fashion industry's advertising campaigns. Fashion spreads in magazines often use imagery and connotations that are questionable, if not downright distasteful to many readers. Eirich's post "Is there nothing that can't be made fashionable?" critiques a fashion spread in the French magazine *Jalouse* that uses a psychiatric theme that the *Jalouse* writer describes as "a deranged appearance, like an outing from the psychiatric hospital" ("Can nothing be made fashionable?"). The post is more of a rant than an analysis, but Eirich knows her audience, and the post is very effective at starting conversation around these photos.

Is there nothing that can't be made fashionable?
by FRANCESCA BERTUZZI 17. 01.13



Figure 18: Is madness really sexy?

Not all bloggers are fond of ranting, however. Angie Cox posts often about the questionable nature of fashion advertising, especially the lack of diversity of age, race and body type. However, she feels that these problems are something “that a rant won’t solve” and instead draws attention to positive changes in the fashion industry, like a new modeling agency in Toronto that represents a true diversity of women (Cox, “Creating and Maintaining”). In keeping with the upbeat tone of her writing and the community she created around it, Cox remains optimistic.



Figure 19: The beginning of diversity in modeling

Recently, however, the employment of male models in haute couture fashion shows has raised questions around diversity in advertising that are more nuanced and multi-faceted. Angie Cox called attention to this trend in a recent post on *YouLookFab*. She takes an ambivalent stance, recognizing that the image she presents to readers offers two very different interpretations. The first is that the popularity of a male model in women’s fashion hints at a loosening of gender rules, since any sign of

femininity in men is generally frowned upon by the culture at large. However, the male model can also be viewed as an even more potent “offending image” of the waif-thin, small-hipped beauty ideal than female models are (Mitchell 15). When this image was posted, most of the reactions took one of these two stances.

Sensational New Way to Model Women’s Clothing

January 4th, 2011 by Angie

Does anything about the model on the right strike you as different from the norm? Click the thumbnail to see a [fullsize picture at the Telegraph](#).

At first glance I thought that this was a young female model in her late teens or early twenties. I was spot on about the age but wrong about the gender. The photo is of a 19 year old male model from Bosnia and Herzegovina. [According to the UK Telegraph](#), male model Andrej Pejic is “enjoying great modeling success due to his womanly good looks”, so much so that he’s booked for the next Marc Jacobs advertising campaign.



Boys who look like girls, transsexuals and transvestites are being booked to pose for photo shoots, to represent great fashion houses like Givenchy, and to walk on runways to showcase women’s clothing – not men’s clothing.

I don’t quite know what to think about this. On the one hand, I find it strange that men would be modeling clothes that are marketed to me, but perhaps that is being too closed minded. Perhaps the bright line between men and women’s fashion is, well, old fashioned. I can easily imagine a future where individuals choose more effeminate or masculine looks quite independently of their sex.

Is the recent movement to blur gender boundaries a step in this direction, or are fashion houses using it to generate publicity?

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Figure 20: Gender-bending or reinforcing stereotypes?

For readers who are concerned with promoting positive female body image and dressing in a way that affirms it, the sight of the male model is alienating. One commenter says of the ad, “Basically, it seems like the ONLY way the fashion industry could get farther from designing for realistic women’s bodies than it already is” (Cox, “A Sensational New Way”). While some commenters viewed the ad as misogynist because it idealizes a male body, it seems to be the case that in fashion, age is more important than gender or sex as a signifier of fashion (Barthes 258). In fact, the model’s age was the first thing that Cox commented on in her post.

One commenter initially favored the ad, saying “Regardless of the motive, I support the movement without reservations” because she thought it was evidence of diversity. However, she wrote a follow-up comment after reading through all the others and changed her opinion. She also revealed in this second comment that she was blind, so the image failed to make the emotional impact on her that it did on the other commenters.

This discussion just reinforces something I’ve always believed—that I’m lucky that my blindness shelters me from the full impact of advertising campaigns. Models are an abstract notion to me, so I can consider this question from a strictly theoretical or academic perspective. I can’t feel alienated by an image and am forced to consider the question without that additional lens (“A Sensational New Way”).

Much of the power of fashion imagery, then, lies in its emotional impact. Anne Hollander argues that “the modern clothed body is a complete figural image, cinematic or televisionary in its impact” (Hollander 27). Images draw us in when what is depicted in them connects with some powerful aspect of our inner life. The act of viewing is what creates this event and is also what makes fashion imagery so powerful. When women who love fashion see images that alienate them, a formal or structural analysis of the picture’s meaning is not as important as the topics produced by the thoughts, emotions and criticisms that have been prompted by the image. The topics that arise out of emotional responses to images are what activate the role of citizen critic in ordinary women, prompting them to start blogs or take other actions. As one commenter on the above post said about fashion advertising, “the fix doesn’t need to come from the models, but from designers AND consumers, who need to continue advocating fashion that fits a much wider range of body shapes and types” (“A Sustainable New Way”).

3 CONCLUSIONS

To advocate for change in the industry, women need public forums to share their views and create a public presence around these issues. I argue that this small, still-evolving network of fashion bloggers have created a space where that can happen. While they do not yet have the money or

influence of major fashion magazines, the medium is exploding as more women start blogs and long-time bloggers embark on new projects. Most important, blogs are dwelling places that are independently created and therefore not solely beholden to advertisers, editors or deadlines, so they have complete creative freedom if they choose to make use of it. In the blogs I've examined, I argue that this small network of bloggers has chosen to play a public role that embodies respect, optimism, problem-solving and critique that is rarely found in mainstream media. Their ethos is evident in the ways they communicate with words and images on their blogs, which can be elaborated in several ways.

First, blogs have explicitly-stated goals, unlike fashion magazines. For DeeDee Robinson, the goal was to analyze her relationship with her clothes (Robinson, "Guest Post: The Ideal Form"). Alison Gary's goal "is to help those who have yet to find their personal style, or find fashion to be overwhelming" (Gary, "About"). Sally McGraw devotes an entire page on her site to her mission statement: "My primary mission is to show that body knowledge gained through explorations of personal style can foster self-love and self-respect" (McGraw, "Mission Statement"). Because the goal of any rhetoric is some type of persuasion or action of the audience, the presence of stated goals shows that there is a specific purpose to the writing that is not just for the sake of creativity, but for communication. McGraw encapsulates this with her hope that "with enough hard work and passionate rhetoric and conscious action—we can change the paradigm" (McGraw, "Variety"). Because "what the observer tends to 'read' is less the clothes themselves than the wearer's role", the ethos these bloggers are creating allows for clothing to be read with its "intended context" so that the various meanings of clothes can be described and debated in public (Campbell 163).

As discussed in chapter one, I've focused on two different aspects of the role of ethos: personal characteristics and deliberate rhetorical choices. From their personal lives and histories, these bloggers bring eating disorders, body image and gender identity difficulties, medical problems and a variety of body shapes. These real world difficulties directly affect what they want from fashion, what they find

lacking in it currently, and what they decide to do about it. These unchangeable personal details are what provide context, background and topics and therefore contribute directly to each blogger's ethos. In contrast to magazines whose articles reveal little about the writer, these writers offer a personalized, engaging space to their readers where they can interact, share and learn.

The deliberate choices bloggers make in communicating on their blogs also define their ethos and differentiate it from most other fashion writing. Their writing is often exploratory and transparent. Many of the posts are structured as narratives rather than analysis, so that the reader doesn't learn the blogger's final opinion until the end of the post. Showing the progress of their thought, rather than presenting it as a neatly-packaged whole, contributes to their role of citizen critic. This is a rhetorical move because it conveys an ethos of openness, thoughtfulness and the ability to change one's mind. This last point is perhaps the most crucial as far as narrative technique is concerned, because it conveys the act, agency and power associated with personal change. Because women have so often been cast as "types" in media and literature, their ability to change their minds has not been portrayed often enough in literature or media in general (French qtd. in Baumlin 105). Baumlin and Baumlin state that "it remains for the female speaker not simply to struggle against the projections of an audience but to reach beyond all typological models of selfhood" (105). Asserting the reality and acceptability of a variety of body shapes is one crucial way that women come to understand how their unique image of their body functions and how they can change it if it turns into a damaging internal dialogue. Like their readers, they are thinking and exploring for themselves and are not concerned with conveying authority or positioning themselves as experts.

The bloggers' positions as citizen critics also allows for an ethos that is highly interactive. When conflict arises, they engage readers who disagree with them or criticize their posts, approaching them as fellow citizens rather than as experts. Acknowledging and dealing with conflict usually leads to insight on the part of both reader and blogger. The nature of the blogging medium also informs the way that

bloggers interact with readers. Although some bloggers respond more often to comments than others do, they all show interest in the thoughts of their readers by asking open-ended questions and using comments as intentional prompts for new posts. Interacting in the blog network also means that they play roles of both writer and audience in their online communities. The reciprocal relationship between writers and readers shows that the subjectivity of readers is just as valid as the blogger's is. In contrast to mainstream fashion discourses that are to be "received" by readers, blog audiences "read" these fashion blogs because they are written with an ethos that encourages interpretation, questioning and participation (Barthes 233). Roach and Eicher note that "the individual can derive aesthetic pleasure from both the act of creating personal display and from the contemplation of his own display and that of others" and this explains why the camaraderie that develops out of shared interests, frustrations and opinions leads many bloggers to take further action (109).

The ethos of this blog network is also practical, as bloggers use their physical, social and economic difficulties as motivation for finding and sharing solutions. Rather than portraying fantasy, they are concerned with information not only about how to dress well, but about how doing so impacts the environment and the overseas labor industry. Where fashion writing is "weak in information" these bloggers seek to provide as much information as possible on all aspects of fashion and dress (Barthes 236). Where mainstream fashion has "constructed women as the object of fashion, even its victim" these women have shown instead that individuals can choose to take an active social role as a subject of fashion by focusing on their everyday wants and needs instead of what the industry tries to sell them (Entwistle, "Addressing the Body" 286).

Another crucial feature of the writing on these blogs is its tendency to use healing language, or iatrology, that aims to counteract the often condescending and fault-finding rhetoric of the fashion system (Baumlin and Baumlin 93). Their use of iatrology is directly responsible for the degree to which these bloggers have been able to create positive communities. The posts in which they most appeal to

pathos through reassuring or healing language are often the ones most commented upon by readers. Taking on a healing role as a writer is a fundamentally different approach than fashion writing's typical avoidance of appeals to pathos (Barthes 260).

In recent months, many of these bloggers have begun new projects and are bringing their ethos of fashion more into public view. Sally McGraw is collaborating on a podcast with two other bloggers. Autumn Whitefield-Madrano has syndicated her blog on *The New Inquiry*, a non-profit online magazine that promotes current journalistic and academic thought on culture. Projects like this are significant not just because they give body-positive fashion a wider audience, but also because of the disappearance of critical fashion journalists who "were tough critics bulldozing their way through an effete world of air kisses and crinolines." (Graham). In his recent article for *The Star*, David Graham laments the disappearance of fashion journalists and explains that "reduced print-media budgets have resulted in fewer fashion critics in the bleachers at fashion shows and more bloggers taking their places—often young women untrained in the craft of criticism" ("Fashion Week"). The bloggers he complains about are those that work closely with fashion designers and therefore are not apt to be as critical. The bloggers in my study, then, provide a critical eye toward fashion that is not currently provided in many places in contemporary media, because they are working in a part of the web that is free from many of the restraints of for-profit publishing empires. W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us that a medium, such as an independently-run a blog, is "a material *social practice*, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes, and conventions" (Williams qtd. in Mitchell 203). The bloggers I have examined are adept users of this medium and they use their technical, verbal and rhetorical skills to redefine what fashion can mean in women's lives.

In many ways, dominant perceptions of the visual in everyday life mirror the traditional view of women as either virgins or whores. Imagery (of which fashion is one type) is often conceived of as either high art or a destructive marketing ploy. Barbara Stafford comments that "No matter where one looks, a

balanced, let alone a constructive, demonstration of the power of sophisticated images to communicate something other than misinformation, violence, pornography, and callous consumerism to tuned-in viewers is absent” (216). I argue that these bloggers demonstrate that power by following a middle path with relation to both feminism and iconography. They argue that using dress and makeup to fashion new images of themselves can be a positive act, as can intelligent discussion on the topics and imagery of fashion. Whitefield-Madrano explains: “What I’d have us do is try to be specific where ‘the modeling industry’—that is, tastemakers, not the models themselves—is unable to be articulate” (“Modeling as Modern-Day Physiognomy”). Because the discursive role she advocates cannot be separated from the community in which it is elaborated and performed, the role of ethos is the central rhetorical basis on which this critique rests.

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