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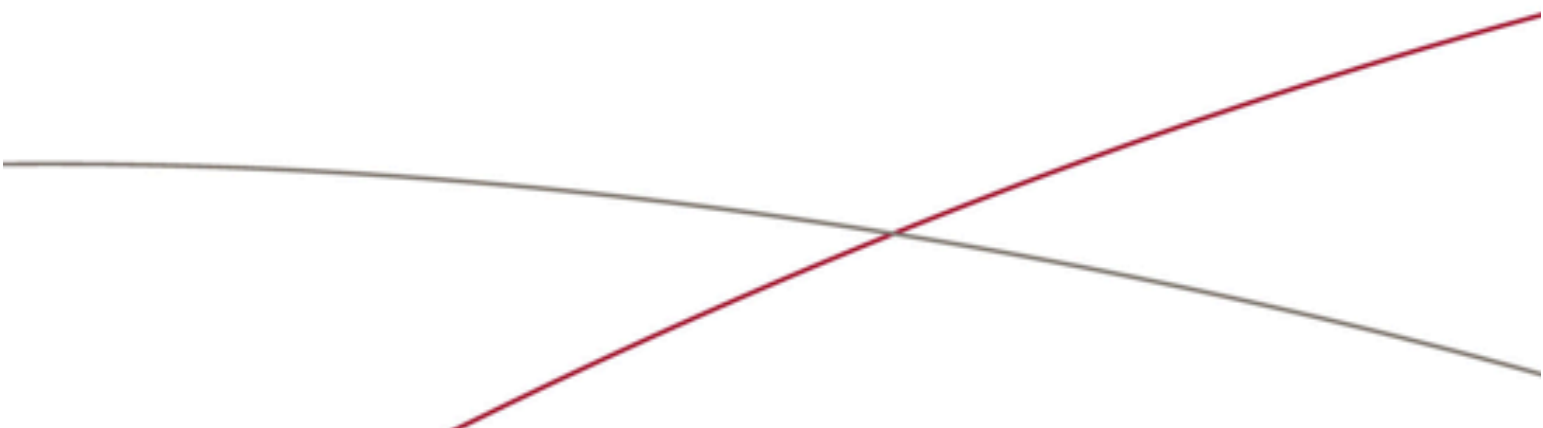# "They made a career with their opinions"

- An exploratory study of reader perception of credibility of

high-status blogger

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Acknowledgements

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Second, to my fellow students but most importantly new friends from the Strategic PR and Lund, especially Clara, Lucy, Christina, Lauren, Delphine, Beri and Matilda. Thank you for working together and encouraging each other to do the best work possible and come out on top. Without you my studies would never have been as fun as it was;

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To Mom, Dad and Edward. You've always believed in me, and I'll never stop showing my gratitude for raising me like you have. My growth from Little Suz to Big Little Suz is due in large part to the three of you. And I know you'll never let me forget that;

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Abstract · Summary

"They made a career with their opinions"
- An exploratory study of reader perception of credibility of
high-status bloggers

The 21st century has developed so quickly digitally that the dissemination of information through e-word-of-mouth is incredibly important. To effectively communicate, companies have to find a way to spread their own messages in a fast, unique way to entice their publics. In the fashion industry, instead of using their own websites and social media, which can be viewed as untrustworthy, many companies turn to partnerships with high-status (career) bloggers in order to reach more people. These high-status bloggers have made careers out of their sites, bringing in a salary through advertising, sponsored content and brand partnerships. The purpose of this study was to find if these bloggers were still seen as a credible source for information when readers knew about their 'status' and earnings, especially how their salary was made.

Initial research made the researcher suspect that the bloggers would not be seen as a credible source. However, the participants focused their responses on their feelings of pride for these amateurs who had made a career out of their opinions, and that as long as they remained as open and authentic as when their blog first started, the bloggers' credibility would remain intact. This exploratory research found that the *source credibility theory* remained true in this digital context, and also provides different sub-factors of credibility for the source of *career blogs*.

Keyword: source credibility theory, career blogger, credibility, trust

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1. Introduction

"In the end, your word is everything, and the trust you have with your readers is everything; if you don't have that, then there's no point in blogging."

(Sara Donaldson, Fashion Bloggers, 2014)

Over the past decade, the world has seen a major shift in how information and messages are presented. The Internet, with its ability to be accessed globally, has changed the way that people interact with each other, and how public relations practitioners and marketers present messages to their stakeholders. As the atmosphere of the internet changes, so changes the way that humans communicate within it. One of the changes that has so recently boomed is the weblog, or blog. Though the first blogs were published in the 1970s, the phenomenon has only gained popularity with the masses recently; in the fashion world, some bloggers are looked at as celebrities and have become household names, instead of the models, celebrities and designers who dominated the fashion world in years past.

Although previously hesitant to the idea of partnering with bloggers to communicate with their consumers, the fashion world has jumped onboard recently. The use of social media is extremely beneficial to public relations practitioners and marketers of fashion, as 'its products are essentially cultural artifacts that stem from social trends and norms and can effectively be circulated' through the use of Web 2.0 channels like social media and blogs (Sedeke & Arora, 2013). One of the main features of PR - telling a story and 'sparking

conversation' while maintaining a relationship with consumers and obtaining favorable publicity - is made possible from the use of social media and blogs (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris & Piercy, 2013, p. 463). In keeping with the study of PR in the fashion world, the focus of this research will be specifically on fashion blogs, as "publicity effectiveness of blogs is higher than that of online magazines - a symptom of a new logic wherein media, marketing, and consumers are joined in 'friendships.'" (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011, p.318). Due to the close relationship of bloggers with both PR agencies and brands themselves through sponsorships and partnerships (like sponsored posts and advertorials), this study will be taking a multidisciplinary look as this study uses a crossover of both public relations and marketing research. Therefore, the definition of public relations used for the purpose of this research is similar to that of consumer public relations. As Hutchinson (2001) explains in her chapter on consumer PR in the Public Relations Handbook, the main aim of consumer PR is "to help build relationships between an organization and existing or potential customers" (p. 354). With the help of blogger partnerships, PR practitioners can act as a facilitator between the consumer (blog reader) and organization, able to 'hold conversations' and create relationships that would not be possible with just marketing tactics (p. 354).

1a. Purpose

This specific thesis will set out to answer the questions concerning the specifics behind how readers perceived factors of credibility from both 'amateur-blogger' (low-status) up to 'career-blogger' (high-status or A-lister), and whether the perceived high-status of blogger affects if readers continue to find bloggers credible, and if readers will continue to follow and respond to bloggers once their

site becomes their full-time job, or when the site becomes more of a business than a hobby. Because the main point of the disseminated message is to influence reader (consumer) opinions, the source that it is sent from is more important than ever in the digital landscape, especially with the amount and range of fashion bloggers currently taking over the blogosphere and the relative public relations and social media marketing posts. In a recent report by Fohr Card, a company that works exclusively with bloggers and brands, the 2015 A/W Fashion Month in New York, Paris, London and Milan respectively generated an astonishing 711,001,450 impressions by a mere 4, 575 presenters. These impressions came from posts via Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Google analytics (Philipkoski, 2015; Fohr Card, 2015). Though there has been research into what credibility factors of bloggers readers find most important, there has been little in to the way of looking into how that credibility is affected once a perceived change in status (from low- to high- status) has occurred. Previous research on corporate run blogs and websites has found that when there is an obvious ulterior motive from a company blog (with a vested interest and bias towards the company), that readers find these blogs untrustworthy. By asking relevant questions, this research will attempt to discover what factors of credibility bloggers have that readers find important, and if career bloggers are viewed like these company blogs, or if their credibility remains intact.

1b.Fashion Blogger Phenomenon

High-status, or 'A-list' bloggers become a type of celebrity or perceived 'expert', and the most successful branch out to become their own brand within the blogging community, and make money and live off of profits from the blog

(Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005; Schmidt, 2007). Previous views of fashion bloggers by 'industry experts' were skeptical, but recently PR professionals have realized the advantages of mixing fashion blogging into their communication plans (Sedeke & Arora, 2013). The phenomenon has escalated so quickly, with millions of bloggers and readers, that in 2014 an Australian network created a docu-series to follow the lives of five prominent, or A-list, fashion bloggers down under (Fashion Bloggers, 2014). The series followed bloggers in their day to day lives, giving behind the scenes looks into how bloggers capitalize: by partnering with brands on photo shoots as models, photographers or creative directors; sometimes all three for one partnership; by featuring their products in their daily lives; by appearing in advertorials featured outside of the blogs; by covering or hosting events for the brand. It looks into how they choose content for posts, how companies approach them, and the opportunities they are awarded for their success, like borrowing designer clothing and being sent to fashion weeks around the world.

The business of blogging has grown so large that Harvard Business Review did a case study on Italian blogger Chiara Ferragni of the highly successful blog, The Blonde Salad. Her company of the same name had a reported $7 million in revenue, through design collaborations, blog advertising and event hosting, all due to the popularity of her blog and social media channels (Strugatz, 2015).

Other sites reporting the news and business of fashion release lists of top bloggers, with the Fashionista.com list of the top 20 most influential personal style bloggers (excluding those who have expanded into full lifestyle sites with teams of stylists and writers) being shared over 8,800 times (Sherman, 2015). The list was based upon social media followers and website traffic,

brand extensions, 'It factor' based on opinions of industry insiders, and Google news searches; readers also create their own internal rankings of bloggers, from low- to high-status, which in turn helps them to find bloggers to 'like' (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). Of the top 20 bloggers, 19 are female, with Bryan Grey Yambao of Bryan Boy as the sole male blogger. Most of these sites started in the 'personal-journal' style of blog and grew to the size they are today. This information played an important role in discovering how readers felt about bloggers in this study. However, it should be noted that the research did not use any names of blogger in the study.

1c.Research Questions

To discover the underlying reasons that readers identify specific bloggers with certain credibility factors, the following research questions will attempt to be answered:

RQ1: What do reader's find important when establishing their own perceived credibility of a high-status blogger?

SQ1: What factors do readers look for in perceived 'credible' high-profile bloggers?

SQ2: How do readers respond to bloggers moving from one perceived 'level' to one of 'higher' prominence?

1d.Limits

The focus of this research will be on reader perceptions of blogger credibility. This study does not look into how high-status bloggers view their own credibility or how they attempt to gain trust with readers. This study also does not focus solely on sponsored posts and blog content, with regards to PR campaigns and

social media marketing, but instead looks at the wider picture of the blogger and blog as a whole. Previous research has been conducted on these areas of research, and it would be interesting to compare the perceived credibility of specific content, but time and accessibility limits the scope of this particular study. However, this exploratory research hopes to give practitioners of both public relations and marketing insight into how blogger relations can affect their brands and campaigns, and how their specific stakeholders respond to different credibility stimuli.

1e. Structure of the Thesis

The following remnants of the thesis will be presented as such: the existing theoretical framework and previous literature on relevant research, including source credibility and previous credibility research on blogs and blog content, though this is not limited to fashion. Next, the reader will be introduced to the methodology and research design that will shape how the study is conducted, including the qualitative research method. The data will be presented with an accompanying analysis in the fourth section, and a conclusion will finalize the thesis, relating the findings back to the aforementioned research questions. A bibliography of references and relevant appendices can be found in the final sections of this paper.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2a. Source Credibility

For the purpose of this research, *credibility* will be defined as the believability of a medium, source or message as described by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953), and involves both a) objective assessments of information quality and accuracy and b) subjective judgments of a source's trustworthiness and expertise as described by Metzger (2007).

The questions regarding credibility start at the source: what source is considered more credible to readers than others, and why? The concept of credibility is multi-dimensional, as shown in past research, and thus, different factors influence the way that people judge a source's credibility (Eisend, 2006). Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) studied how audiences would respond to specific stimuli, and how these would in turn affect attitudes of credibility. The stimuli include observable characteristics of a perceived source of communication, the setting in which the person is exposed to the communication and content elements. They found that communicators – or those who communicate directly to the audience (the source) – could affect the change process of opinions in a number of ways. If this specific research, a particular example is if the communicator is 'personally admired or a member of a high status group', then their words 'may raise the incentive value of

the advocated opinion by suggesting that approval will follow the opinions adoption by others (p. 20).

As the age of the Internet advances, the need for credible sources in communication takes a larger role in public relations functions. Traditionally, PR practitioners or spokespeople have ranked low on credibility and trust scales (Mohammed, 2012). As such, there is a direct need for trust based communication with stakeholders through a different means for better relationship building (Kang, 2010). Agencies have realized this, and have attempted to branch out through different forms, especially by using different kinds of spokespeople: celebrity spokespeople, 'normal' spokespeople (i.e. Jared, from Subway), and many fashion brands are using websites, social media and bloggers in an attempt to differ from these traditional forms (Zhu and Tan, 2007). However, due to the large number and diversity in the voices on the internet, it can be difficult for readers to distinguish between credible and less credible sources; blogs especially have become very 'fashionable' among writers, readers, marketers and PR professionals (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011), though not without their own issues.

Research has shown that, especially as individuals become more active in the communication channels they select, when a communicator is perceived as having an intention to persuade others, or, for example, has a vested interest in communicating positive things about specific subjects, the communicator is deemed less worthy of trust by the audience (Zhu & Tan, 2007). Now, technologies are increasingly fast moving and developing, and online consumers can and are directly reacting to and commenting on messages that organizations share with these consumers. It is because of these factors that many brands have turned to blogger relations, such as blog post sponsorship or blog partnerships to

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promote products in collaboration with the brand itself, have bloggers host events and create their own original content about the products from the brand. In this way, bloggers can help brands release information to stakeholders through a channel though to be more credible than their own while building an audience for the blog and possibly forming new relationships between reader and the brand.

2.2 Literature Review

2b. Blogs as a Medium

Weblogs, or blogs, first emerged in the 1970s, but have only gained traction as a popular communication tool recently. They are predominantly opinion-based, and the largest amount is of the 'personal diary' genre, with their own thoughts, content and ideas; the largest demographic for these types of blogs are females and teenagers (Schmidt, 2007). It will be this type of 'personal fashion diary' blog that will be assessed for this particular research.

Due to the informal tone-of-voice and higher para-social interaction (PSI, as referred to by Colliander & Dahlén, 2011) and the emphasis of two-way communication with readers (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002), blogs are becoming leading influencers for today's web users, with publicity effectiveness as powerful as word-of-mouth recommendations, which can be more effective in reaching consumers than other online and traditional media resources and types of advertising (Zhu & Tan, 2007). According to Hodkinson (2006) and Wei (2004), the above factors 'facilitate interaction with other bloggers and readers, thus allowing for the emergence and sustaining of communities of shared interests and subcultural identification' (as cited in Schmidt, 2007).

Because the reach of blogs is so vast, they have emerged as a highly useful tool for social marketing (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Kozinets et al., 2010; Zhu & Tan, 2007; Tutaj & Reijmersdal, 2012), by helping to give companies a presence online and give information to and engage with publics, while simultaneously building relationships with them (Porter, Sweetser and Chung, 2009). This sign of interest in its consumers can help to render the corporation as trustworthy and credible (Chu and Kamal, 2008). An article in the New York Times reported that a popular blog endorsement helped one company grow its sales from $100,000 to $4 million (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Jaret, 2006). Because of the magnitude of the blogging phenomenon, influential bloggers are making businesses of their own sites, becoming stars, or A-Listers in their own rights, and these specific bloggers are being hailed as the 'new influencers among their readership' (Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005). Research by Hsiao Lu and Lan (2013) has already indicated the existence of a positive relationship between attitude and behavioral intention (including purchase intention when relating to products or services), and also includes a similar study on blog attitudes by Bouhlel, Mzoughi, Ghachem and Negra (2010). These studies show that social media marketing can have a direct reflection on purchase intention in readers.

2c. Blog Credibility

Studies have shown that people judge the credibility of Internet sites differently (Kaye and Johnson, 2011). In these studies, it has been shown that 'personal blogs' are assessed differently than other types of blogs, like news or media. In differentiating between different levels of credibility for different blogs, research

has found that 1) blog users considered blogs as a more credible source' due to the fact that they are a 'fair' alternative to company-controlled blogs because they reflect the commercial interests of its sponsor (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Senecal and Nantel, 2004); and 2) that 'blogs are often created by those close to the source…and so they offer up-to-date and more realistic accounts than traditional new reports' (Kaye and Johnson, 2011; Zhu & Tan, 2007).

2d. Blogger Credibility

One of those most important issues facing bloggers is that of credibility: how can a blogger ensure that readers find them credible and return to the site for their opinions? Blogs are first and foremost a channel for bloggers to express their own opinions and experience (Zhu & Tan, 2007). Wright (2005) found that honesty, authenticity and openness are crucial for the success of a blog, while past research by Chu and Kamal (2008) found that perceived blogger credibility reflects Hovland et al. and Metzger's ideas about judgments of trustworthiness and expertise in order to influence reader attitudes. Research has shown that blogs still remain an 'uncontrollable platform' (Huang, Shen, Lin and Chang, 2007), and Johnson and Kaye (2004) include the common arguments against blog credibility: anyone can create one, there is no responsibility for content, information can be posted in an anonymous manner, and posters may not be bound by journalistic ethics (Banning and Sweetser, 2007).

However, Colliander and Dahlén (2011) found that interaction factors of top bloggers made them become seen as a 'fashionable friend' (p. 314). The para-social interaction of exposing readers to bloggers' personal lives and seeing them

interact with readers in comments helps to develop a relationship between bloggers and readers, and creates perceived 'intimacy' and 'friendship', which in turn makes readers more susceptible to the bloggers' opinions (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Rubin and Liddy, 2006).

This relationship, however, is fragile: the 'friendship' could end if the blogger proves to be biased, or found to be not credible by the readers. 'Consumers consider the writer's, or blogger's, credibility as an important part of their receptiveness to a published item. The more prominent and credible the writer, the more persuasive the items that appear under her name' (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011, p. 315-316).

2d.1. Blog Content and Sponsored Posts

For readers, and possible consumers, it is important that information comes from peers, or 'people like me'. If the perceived credibility of a blogger falls, readers are more likely to react in a strong negative manner. Because of this, Colliander and Dahlén (2011) emphasize the importance of source credibility in blogs. However, many bloggers, as discussed on forums and comment sections (as discussed in the following sections from Schiffer, 2015) rely on some sort of advertising or commissions from clickable purchase links for the upkeep of their blogs, and many also receive gifts of clothes to wear in order to produce content for their posts. As the blogs gain a reader-base and are followed, bloggers begin to create posts sponsored by a specific brand or are sent places by a brand while getting content about the brand published on the former blog. As pointed out by Tutaj and Reijmersdal (2012), 'the boundaries of editorial and commercial content are blurring' (p. 6). This means that it is harder for readers to tell the difference

between sponsored content and/or brand placement and regular editorial content, and this is an 'effective format to enhance positive reactions toward the advertiser' (p. 7). As Colliander and Dahlén (2011) point out, 'as long as bloggers genuinely follow brands, their readers form friendships with the brands as well' (p. 318). However, only little research (Jensen, 2011) has been done qualitatively to discover how sponsored content affects how readers view a blogger's credibility.

2e. Relation to Research

This thesis will use this theoretical framework and past research on blogs as a medium and their perceived credibility to examine in a new way how credibility towards high status bloggers is affected by a perceived 'rise' in a bloggers status. By reflecting back on the source credibility theory and the points made by researchers about 'business'-oriented sites while also comparing this to the fact that these are blogs and not independent lifestyle sites, the research can fill in the gap not covered by current research. Though quantitative research on blog and blogger credibility has been done, this specific area of blogger credibility has barely been touched by researchers and could potentially impact how practitioners work with bloggers in the future. By implementing a theoretical background, practitioners can make educated choices about partnerships for their current and future PR campaigns.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the deeper meanings in participants responses about a bloggers perceived status and how this affects their view of the bloggers credibility. This study is being conducted in order to make sense of how publics (i.e. the blog reader) perceive different factors to get a detailed understanding of the underlying components of credibility and how they are understood and felt by the publics. This research will not furthermore try to examine if this perceived credibility of bloggers affects if readers engage with them more or less. The research followed an interpretivist epistemological approach; due to this, and to find sufficient material to answer the research questions mentioned previously, this study was conducted as exploratory qualitative research, which is in the minority of public relations research (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

The following sections will properly define the research philosophy followed while analyzing the data, and will properly outline and define the specific research design and methodology to make the reader aware of why the research choices and approaches were made. Some scholars argue that qualitative researches fail to properly articulate the procedures used in the research, and the following sections aim to describe the full conduct of the study by the researched.

3a. Research Philosophy

Due to this study's interest in the examination of how blog readers make sense of credibility factors, there is a distinct emphasis on how the participants in the study interpret and give meaning to their surroundings (i.e. the factors); hence, this study does not exist to find one objective truth. Hence, this study will be looked at from a social constructivist ontological perspective (Bryman, 2012). As Moses and Knutsen (2007) point out, for constructivists the patterns found within data are not law, but are a product of a groups own making; participants see different things, and how situations are viewed is determined by social and contextual influences. In keeping with this outlook, the researcher was looking at how participants' views may change due to the contextual influences of blogger status.

The epistemological approach to this research is rooted in interpretivism. As stated by Daymon and Holloway (2011), interpretive research's primary concern is to understand how meaning is constructed and re-constructed through communication relationships. Through this approach, the research can look into, for example, how the 'impressions and understandings held by a community are informed' (p.6). In this instance, the community will be that of fashion blog readers, and how their impressions and understandings of blogger credibility are formed, and the research will be conducted from the perspective of the participant, rather than using research language and theory. In keeping with interpretivism, the social constructive perspective not only recognizes the role of society in constructing reality, but also the role of the researcher while observing patterns in an attempt to understand the meaning of the social action being studied (Moses & Knutsen, 2007; Holliday, 2007).

To collect and analyze the data in the interpretivist perspective, a grounded theory methodology was used. Using this methodological approach, the researcher was allowed flexible guidelines for the collection and analysis of the qualitative data, with strategies including the act of looking back and forth between data and analysis because data collection and analysis take place simultaneously, uses comparative methods, and the interaction and involvement between researcher, data and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This approach allows the researcher to use an abductive logical approach to analyzing the data. This specific research will use Charmaz's *constructivist grounded theory*, to 'acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data' (2014, p. 14), and to differentiate between both conventional grounded theory and social constructivism approaches to grounded theory.

3b. Methodology: Exploratory Research

The main point of qualitative research is to uncover the views and meanings held by the research participants and to understand the world in their own terms (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 7). To be able to fully uncover the views on credibility held by participants, an exploratory approach to research was decided upon by the researcher. Exploratory research is appropriate when studying a part of the field that has not been studied extensively. Though blog credibility has been researched, the qualitative study of how perceived status is looked at by blog readers has not been studied, especially in the case of fashion bloggers. Because of this lack of research, the topic and way of research was chosen in hopes of uncovering the meanings of the participants' responses (Boeije, 2010)

Exploratory research occurs when researchers have little to no scientific knowledge about the situation being studied, but feel there is something worth discovering. With this in mind, researchers should approach the study with 1) flexibility when looking for data and 2) open-mindedness about where to find it 5 (Stebbins, 2008, p. 327).

A second type of research approach that was considered was an exploratory case study – to find an exploration of the 'hitherto unknown' (Streb, 2010); this approach, though extremely relevant if successful, is only possible when the preliminary collection of data is present. For a case study to have been successful, the researcher would have had to identify a 'low status' blogger and follow their eventual path to success; as the phenomenon of fashion bloggers is relatively new and somewhat unexpected, this particular approach would be almost impossible without limitless time constraints and ability to track bloggers.

3c. Qualitative Surveys: Self-Completion Questionnaires

In line with the study's interpretivist epistemological approach, qualitative self-administered and self-completed questionnaires[1] (Bryman, 2012) were used to examine the interpretations of meanings and understandings of participants in the study. There is a more natural fit between qualitative research, with its ability to delve into meaning, and the interpretive ways of thinking which are concerned with the social construction of reality from those meanings (Daymon & Holloway,

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, the questionnaires will be referred to as surveys throughout the rest of this thesis.

2011). Though some scholars view this method as weak since it has only been briefly covered in books on data analysis, like Fink (2003) and Bryman (2012c), Jansen (2010) argues that as long as the data can be translated into knowledge aims (operationalization), the choice to use a qualitative survey is justified.

The main purpose of these surveys was to concentrate on fewer clear issues in depth rather than looking at a wide variety of subjects (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p.241) and to find variation in the population rather than quantitative information (Jansen, 2010). Moreover, as qualitative surveys investigate participant accounts of social interaction, but not actual social interaction (Jansen, 2010) surveys were found to be an appropriate method.

Because the subject of this study is blogs – an online phenomena – the choice for computer mediation and online surveys was obvious. The survey was distributed through the typeform.com platform, allowing the researcher to create an engaging survey that participants would enjoy taking. This way, the researcher was also hoping that participants would enjoy taking and recommend the survey to others, similar to a snowball effect. Additionally, there is also the absence of interviewer effects on how participants respond, as interviewer characteristics can influence biased answers (Bryman, 2012).

This research was initially going to be undertaken by using focus groups; the innate dynamics of focus groups, questions, answers and opinions are all constructed and re-constructed by members of the group themselves as they would in their own natural environment. However, even though recruitment was done on a variety of platforms, including fashion-focused forums and websites, like lookbook.nu and Chictopia (among others), and Lund University student groups, Facebook groups and through word-of-mouth, there were not enough participants to

create an engaging atmosphere in which participants could discuss the subject

matter. Ultimately, different ways of research were looked into, and qualitative

surveys best suited the time and resource limitations of this thesis.

3d. Sampling

The sampling of the survey participants was purposeful, based on previously

well-defined criteria determined by the aim of this research (Bryman, 2012;

Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Due to the subject area of fashion bogs and previous

research about the age and sex of readers, participants were recruited with a

distinct purpose in mind: to answer questions about fashion bloggers. These

participants fit the target group parameters of: identifying as female, a fashion

blog reader, and falling within the age bracket of 18-35; these limits were set

because of the field being studied. Due to the global scale of blogs and the ease of

access from anywhere and any device, the participants came from a total of 16

different nationalities: 11 European, two North American, Australian, and two

Asian[2].

While internet sampling can be a problem due to the inability to know if

participants are who they say they are, each participant did leave a name and

email address. The participants were recruited from a number of sites and forums,

including Facebook groups for Lund University students and public groups for

those interested in fashion blogging, as well as blogging-based websites and

forums. The sample that participated in this research was both homo- and

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[2]   The nationalities are as follows. From Europe: Sweden, Germany, Greece, Poland, UK, Iceland, Russia, Latvia, Faroe Islands, Portugal, Spain; North American: USA, Canada; Asia: India, China; Australia.

heterogeneous (due to the differences in nationality). However, because this research was looking for patterns coming from common factors - age range, sex and blog interest, the sample is viewed as homogeneous, or similar to each other.

Lastly, the research employed *theoretical sampling*, as is done in grounded theory. The researcher collected data, observed and analyzed while continuing to survey participants until theoretical saturation has been achieved (Bryman, 2012). During the study, as the researcher began to notice pattern and distinct themes, it became clear that a larger sample was needed, until finally the collected data was saturated.

3e. Data Collection

The empirical data of this study was collected using self-completion surveys distributed online from March 26 until April 8, 2015. According to the metrics from the survey platform, there were 135 unique visits to the online survey and 44 responses (five of which could not be used because participants did not fit into the sample parameters), with a completion rate of 33%. Because of the qualitative nature of the study and the heterogeneous sample size, the larger sample of 39 respondents fit the needs of the researcher rather than a smaller sample size (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

The researcher posted a link to the survey with information on what the survey was about and what it would be used for. On an ethical note, participants were informed that all participant information would be confidential, and all in-text quotes would be shared anonymously as long as permission was received. The entire recruiting and survey process was internet-based, as blogs, forums, chats and comment sections are the 'natural' environment of the study participant.

The survey was created on the typeform.com platform, creating an engaging environment for the participants; the survey platform creates a 'friendly' and 'encouraging' platform for users, with the entire template designed by the researcher[3]. The survey 'thanked' the participants through text after each question and asked them to continue using friendly words and phrases. The first eight questions sought demographic information and information on the participants' blog use and reading habits. The next 11 questions were created based on an analysis of codes and themes gathered from prior research (Rubin & Liddy, 2006; Kang, 2010; Wright, 2005; Chu & Kamal, 2008), the researchers content analysis of comments from articles, and the information wished to be gained for the sake of the research question (Roulston, 2014) as shown in the forthcoming section[4]. Though many qualitative researchers use only induction in their analysis, this survey did have elements of pre-structure, as Jansen (2010) notes that qualitative surveys are concerned with diversity and meaning rather than quantitative data.

Through peer review, the questions were critiqued and re-worded; there was concern that some of the survey items could be considered 'leading questions', with the answers embedded within them. This could have led the participants to give answers only related to pre-structured data from previous research from Rubin and Liddy (2006) and Kang (2010). The researcher justified the reasons behind this because, though the language used to create the questions included examples that the participants might give, this was done in order to maintain professional language in the actual question and to make sure participants

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[3]An example from the survey interface can be found in Appendix B.

[4] The full survey can be found in Appendix B.

understood the purpose of the question. Though examples were given, the questions were open ended, with participants invited to give any and all answers they could think of, not at all limited to the examples given in the text of the question. Participants were also given information before the last four questions about how career bloggers make money and what may come with 'status', though no examples of bloggers are given and no quantitative of the number of career bloggers and their salaries was given. This was done in order to see if contextual influences would affect participant responses.

3e.1. Previous Themes and Coded Words

Though this is exploratory research, there have been studies on credibility factors of bloggers in general. In order to create questions in order to answer the research questions, the researcher looked at previous studies done by Rubin & Liddy (2006) and Kang (2010), which have identified certain factors used in *quantitative* research to gauge *levels* of blogger credibility. These factors include:

Table 3.1

Rubin & Liddy	Rubin & Liddy	Rubin & Liddy	Kang	Kang
Blogger expertise and offline identity disclosure	*Blogger trustworthiness and value system*	*Appeals and triggers of a personal nature*	*Blogger credibility*	*Blog message/ content credibility*
Name & Location	Biases	Aesthetic Appeal	Knowledgable	Authentic
Credentials	Beliefs	Personal connection	Influential	Insightful
Stated Competencies	Opinions		Passionate	Informative
	Honesty		Transparent	Consistent

	Preferences		Reliable	Fair
	Habits			Focused
	Slogans			Accurate
				Timely
				Popular

For the purpose of this research, a content analysis from comments drawn from an online fashion magazine article on how influential (or A-list) fashion bloggers have changed over the years (Schiffer, 2015) was used to find certain factors for coding purposes. Comments included phrases like 'raw', 'accessibility (for everyday people)', 'snobby vibe', and 'hard to relate', among others.

Wright (2005) and Chu & Kamal (2008) also looked into blogger credibility factors, though these fell into *honesty* from Rubin and Liddy and *knowledgeable and influential* from Kang. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the codes and themes for the analysis of the collected data were not limited to the aforementioned factors and factors, but were looked at for possible similarities and pattern identification.

3f. Analyzing Data

The collected data from the online surveys was transferred to a spreadsheet for processing and analysis. The data was collected in English and consequently, because of the many nationalities, had typing errors, but the language and meaning of the answers was not affected by these errors. Thus, the spelling was

not corrected to ensure the integrity of the answers given, and to stay as close to the original answers given by the participants as possible.

As described by Burnard et al. (2008), this research used both deductive and inductive logical reasoning approaches to analyze the collected data. Though inductive approaches are the most common approach to qualitative data through little to no predetermined theory (and being in accordance with conventional grounded theory), structure or framework, the first phases of research and analysis were deductive. These ways of reasoning and observation create the basis of all research (Reichertz, 2014); through looking at pre-determined factors as identified in and past studies and observing the target sample in other forums and comment boards, the researcher was able to develop ways to code and theme the data, but using these entirely would undermine the point of this exploratory research. Hence, the final themes were open to be determined by the data itself, without being limited to the previous codes and factors, as seen in the table in section 3f.1.

This mixture of approaches, or abductive approach, 'is intended to help social research, or rather social researchers, to be able to make new discoveries in a logically and methodologically ordered way' according to Reichertz (2010), and described as a 'cognitive logic of discovery' bringing together those things which researchers had never associated with each other before. With this way of reasoning, the research has a logical path for the creation of new ideas. Thus, without 'adhering to the conventional view of things' (Reichertz, 2014), the researcher is able to assess and re-asses as much as possible during analysis to make observations during the analysis that come across perhaps hidden meanings in participant responses.

In order to organize the empirical data, a *thematic analysis* was used. After the processing of data from the survey transcripts and the initial coding and recoding, patterns began to emerge. Eventually patterns fully presented themselves through the refinement of the codes. Though the codes assigned 'inevitably reflect' the researchers own disciplinary background (Barbour, 2014), the researcher also used equivalent coding categories and in-vivo codes in order to keep the analysis as reliable as possible.

The specific themes decided upon were used to simplify the categorization and order the material, and to put make sense of the code words used in the analysis. After the refinement of codes and in keeping with the research question, the themes decided on were *Blog Factors* and *Perceived Status*, each with sub-categories discussed in the analysis, which immediately stuck out to the researcher as strikingly familiar to the makeup of the source credibility theory of Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953). The first cycle of coding used both *In Vivo* and *Descriptive* coding; In Vivo coding keeps the data rooted in the participants own language, while descriptive coding is used to document and categorize the breadth of opinions stated by multiple participants (Saldaña, 2013). Many of the code words, like 'opinion', 'honesty' and 'relatability' were primarily In Vivo code words, and were then applied to other participant answers where the meaning of the statements could be described by these code words. Due to the number of participants, the number of code words was initially large, but they were then categorized to create a smaller, more precise analysis of the answers. Because of the open-ended nature of the questions and the coding process, and deciding on the aforementioned themes, the researcher was able to organize the empirical data in an intelligible way. However, as this was an abductive approach, the data

influenced the decisions rather than the researcher using preconceived categories, codes and themes.

3g. Validity Criteria and Credibility of Research

Silverman (2010) and Daymon and Holloway (2011) describe two central concepts needed to describe 'rigor' in scientific research as *reliability* and *validity*. Reliability is 'the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions (Hammersley, 1992 as cited in Silverman, 2010, p. 145). Since qualitative research is difficult to replicate, the concept of reliability is problematic in this study. However, Daymon and Holloway (2011) and Bryman (2012) suggest creating a detailed record of the sequential steps taken in the process of the research. While the results may not be generalizable from this study, the method is and can be replicated in order to try to reproduce the study.

On the other hand, validity is data 'interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers' (Hammersley, 1990 as cited in Silverman, 2010). The aim of this research is to present the meanings behind participant responses via the chosen analytical method as accurately as possible. Moreover, by writing analytical memos, going through numerous cycles of coding and creating an operational model to explain the relation of codes to each other, the researcher was able to create a reliable study.

3h. Limitations

Due to the ways in which participants were recruited, there was a question over identify and honesty about participant information. However, most included

detailed demographic information, and those that did not were excluded from the survey analysis. As previously stated, focus groups were the preferred method of research in order to gain insight through discussions of the subject; with surveys, it is impossible for participants to gain insight from their peers and either give explanations to their opinions or come to a different socially constructed viewpoint, as may be possible in a focus group. It is also impossible for the researcher to prompt and probe participants for further insight into their responses, but as this was exploratory research, the initial focus was to collect data to explore the high-status fashion blogger credibility phenomena.

A final limitation of surveys is the self-recruitment of this particular study. It is always possible that participants who choose to take surveys, and this survey specifically, may answer differently than if participants were chosen by the researcher from a sample field. Due to the specificity of this field, only fashion blog readers chose to answer the survey. However, as previously mentioned, the fashion blogosphere is very large, and though the data does shed light on the research questions, to fully understand this area of research, these types of studies should be repeated in order to get a full grasp on the meanings of participant's responses.

4. Results and Analysis

The collected data was organized using a thematic analysis, and thus put into central themes and categories taken from the empirical data, i.e. the participants' answers to the qualitative research survey. This section will present both the results from the survey in both qualitative and quantitative formats. This was done using a relatively simple mixed-method format, as quantitative graphs are in place to the over-arching positive and/or negative tone of answers before in-depth analysis of responses. The analysis will present both researcher interpretation and a discussion of how this relates to the theoretical framework presented in Section 2 of this paper. Due to the large number of participants, only some participant answers will be presented in this analysis (participant 1 = P1, etc.), though all answers were considered while conducting the analysis. The term 'blogger' will also refer to someone that blogs for a living, or a career blogger. There will be contextual differentiation between A-list (or high status) bloggers and lower-status bloggers. All participants quoted within this section gave permission for their answers to be used in-text.

During the study and finally upon completion of the analysis, the researcher developed an operational model of the analyzed data to relate themes and sub-categories, and show how the collected data is inter-related. Model 4.1 is presented below to initially help the reader make sense of how the section is structured and why themes are discussed in the order they are in.
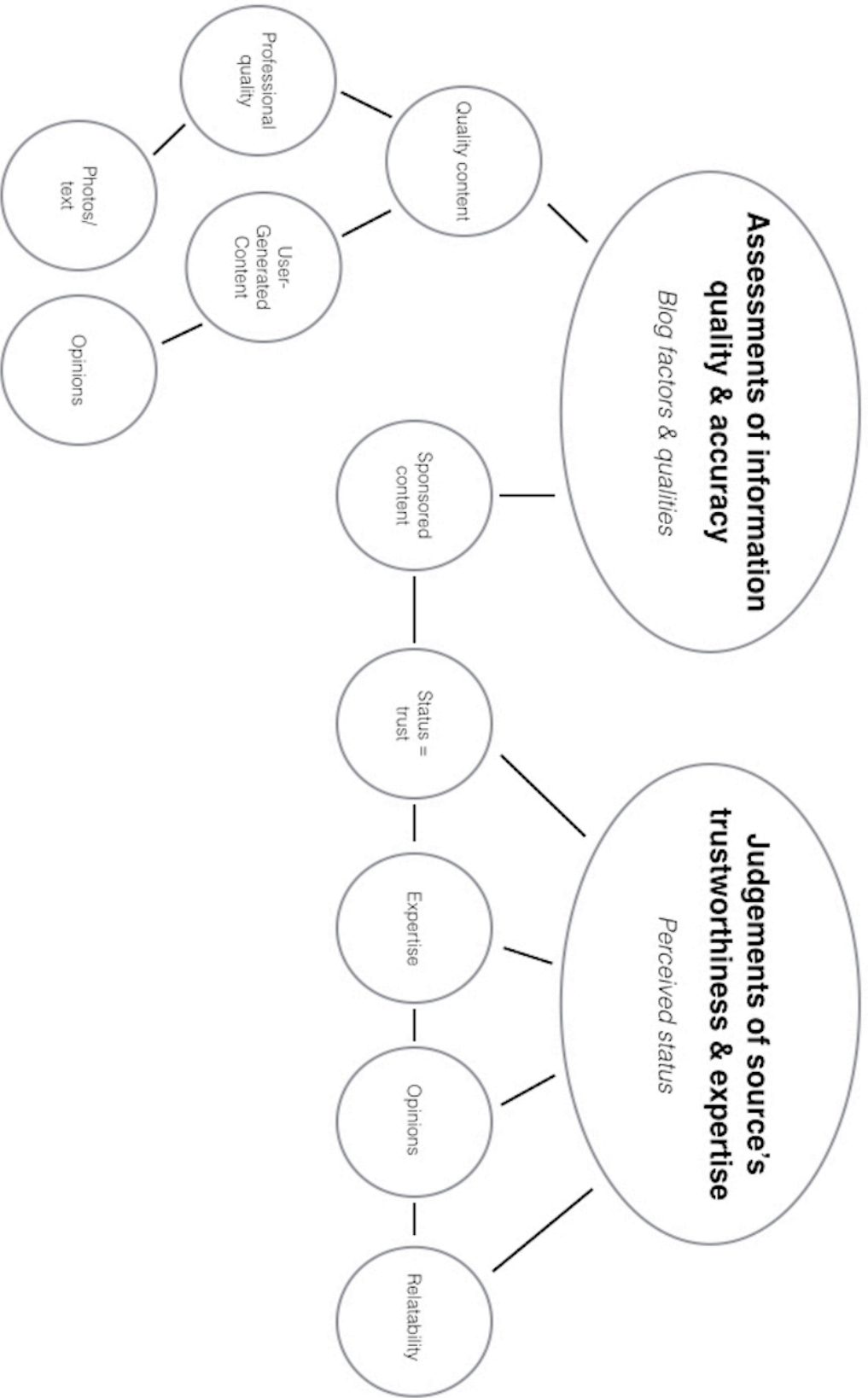
Model 4.1

4.1 Blog Factors: User Generated Content

"Even if the person's style is not the same as mine, I sometimes

still enjoy reading their blog because it inspires me and gives

me ideas that I would not thought of. Often times, these blogs

where people have very different styles than mine open my eyes

to pieces of clothing or accessories that I would not see in stores

that I shop at (sic)."

Participant 18

In order to fully understand the participants' behavior and meanings, the researcher began the survey by asking participants to identify what factors initially attracted them to reading a fashion blog, and what kind of factors made them become a follower of a fashion blog.

While previous analysis of comments and observation of fashion blogs, and with regards to previous literature, the assumption would be that the most important initial factor would be the 'personality' behind the blog, and that blogger's personal style. In reviewing literature, Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) and explain that people (participants) assess information - in this context information meaning content - quality and accuracy. Rubin and Liddy (2006) added the importance of content being complete, unbiased and appropriate.

In this research, the overwhelming majority of participants stated they a) chose to look at a blog for the first time and/or b) became a long term follower depended on the quality of the blogs content, or:

"When I feel like the content is rich in variety and interesting."

Participant 2

The term *content* was distinguished in the coding process by being broken down into

1) User Generated Content (UGC) with professional quality, i.e. 'perceived professionalism' of text and photos within blog posts:

> "The quality of the pictures are extremely important as well
>
> as with the content (sic)."

Participant 5

2) the material included in the blog, i.e. whether the UGC was focused on an interesting topic, or accurate and appropriate:

> "Good…pictures is (sic) definitely something that makes me interested! But also if I share the same interest."

Participant 1

> "Feels like there is something interesting and I should have a look at it."

Participant 7

> "I only follow blogs that talk about a majority of topics I'm interested in."

Participant 32

4.1.1 Professional Quality UGC

When asked in parts of the survey what kind of information readers looked for from bloggers, the importance of visual stimuli of blogs was readily evident. Of the participants, only three readers preferred text-based posts as opposed to photo-based posts, but also added that for a blog about fashion and style, it was highly important for the blogger to include photos

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to draw in and attract readers. However, these photos should be high-quality, or the perceived 'professionalism' of the photo is important to the reader, as "high quality photos tend to make a blog more appealing" (P16). This type of UGC not only attracts the reader, but also is appreciated for time-efficiency and ease of us (Sedeke and Arora, 2013), as shown when participants answered that photos were easy to look at and had the added attractiveness of speed, emphasized by P5: "I'm a visual person, and I need to see new stuff quickly on the go."

4.1.2 Material Content of the Blog (UGC)

However, professional quality must combine with content that readers are interested in. "It needs to be catchy and it needs to look like they know what they're doing," (P26). While many participants cited the importance of professional photos for both initial viewing and following of a blog, the material content of the blog was also important, as blog readers had to be interested or 'inspired' by the content produced on the site. This was found to be in accordance with Kang (2010) and Banks (2008), as participants showed that they value blog content that is focused, insightful and informative. Secondly, participants looked for the quality or relatability of the opinions expressed by the blogger, and these opinions greatly affect how readers felt about the blogger (see section 4.2). Participants found that if the content they came across in the blog did not fit their needs or what they were looking for, they were very likely to close it and not become a follower. Without quality and accurate information provided via the content of the blogs, participants were not likely to view it as a source of inspiration, which circles

back to the *source credibility theory*, as seen in Model 4.1 under "assessments of information quality and accuracy.

4.2 Blog Factors & Perceived Status: Opinions

"It [the blog] has to look professional and well-organized. I

end up returning to a blog if I like the advice it gives."

Participant 28

A second important type of content is the opinions on fashion and style given by bloggers. Previous research has found that part of the trustworthiness is based on the 'quality' or type of opinions given by these bloggers (Rubin & Liddy, 2006; Zhu & Tan, 2007). These opinions, which on fashion and style blogs serve as endorsements for the products they wear and style for their content, which relate directly to the credibility of the blogger (Zhu & Tan, 2007). As most fashion bloggers are in the 'personal-journal' type of format, these opinions also connect the reader to the blogger's real life.

"I like the blog to have some text describing the trend being

worn, or any tips and tricks. It's also nice to see outfits that are

worn in real life, and don't seem like they were only worn for the photo."

Participant 9

The participants noted throughout the survey that one of the factors that they looked for most was the opinions of a blogger. In most cases, this was linked to how a blogger styled a piece of clothing or their opinion on a brand, but was also linked to their daily lives and how the clothing they wore related to themselves, and how it could relate to their readers lives as well. Not only were these opinions shown in the text provided by bloggers, but was made evident through the pictures

that bloggers choose to share with readers, as those are how they provide their

preferences or 'opinions' on clothing and styling options.

> "I think most of them are trustworthy. Most bloggers will not blog about
> products that they don't (at least to some degree) like in order to
> keep their credibility."

Participant 10

Because participants looked to the bloggers for their quality opinions, this in

turn leads a blogger to become connected in many more ways to a reader. They

turn into an 'influencer' (Banning & Sweetser, 2007), they become like a

'fashionable friend' to a reader, or more 'relatable' (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011;

see section 4.3), and they become perceived as amateur experts (section 4.5). As

shown in model 4.1, these factors inter-link with the opinions of a blogger in order

for them to remain credible.

However, participants noted that the transparency and honesty of opinions was

equally as important as the 'quality' of the opinions themselves.

> "I feel like often times, we can sense when someone's opinion is biased.
> If I can feel that the blogger's opinion on the content is honest, I have
> no problem with it."

Participant 18

Along the same lines, Zhu and Tan (2007) and Wright (2005) reported that the

credibility of the blogger is tightly linked with the credentials of the blogger; or, if

it seems that the blogger is not being truthful or working with brands or pieces

that she would normally associate with, then the possibility of readers to mistrust

or stop reading that blogger rise. Honesty, authenticity and openness are crucial

for blogs (Zhu & Tan, 2007, p. 2) as agreed upon by the participants. This feeling

of authenticity in turn helps the blogger to seem like that fashionable friend who just 'knows the right brands' or 'always looks good', and also directly links to feelings of trust that readers have towards a blogger. Becoming seen as this type of influential 'friend' also makes the blogger become more relatable to the reader, as will be discussed in section 4.3.

> "So long as a blog has interesting, authentic-seeming content, I will continue to read it."
>
> *Participant 9*

> "If I…feel it's [the content] not honest and original I'll just unfollow."
>
> *Participant 4*

It is important to understand when viewing these responses that perceptions of honesty, authenticity and openness may be different for each respondent. Further research about how participants understand and construct their own personal meanings of these factors and how these then correlate to bloggers would be useful for even deeper understanding. Due to limits in both time and resources, it was not possible for this thesis, but should be considered for future blog credibility qualitative studies.

4.3 Blog Factors & Perceived Status: Relatability

Studies such as Bernoff (2009) found that 77% of people trust information that comes from a person who they know (as cited in Sedeke & Arora, 2013). In the questions used to discover what readers looked for from a blogger, the personal factor of relatability to readers came through code words including 'relatable', 'personality' and 'feel' or 'vibe' taken from the content provided by the blogger.

In this instance again, *relatability* was divided into two sub-categories:

1) *content* that not only interests readers, but they can relate to.

"I am also drawn to blogs that show inspirational, but approachable outfits and products (not too expensive or 'out there')."

Participant 9

"I would much rather read a blog about a thrifty fashionista who dresses fabulously on bargain finds, than a blog about someone who spends a ton of cash on designer labels and/or gets their clothes for free."

Participant 16

"I'm really turned off by blogs that are disconnected…"

Participant 38

and 2) the *personality* of the blogger, and para-social interaction (PSI) or blogger and reader.

"Does the writer have a strong voice (personality)? This has a huge effect on if I can connect to the blog or not…"

Participant 3

"I like personal posts, it is nice to get to know the person behind the blog a bit better."

Participant 30

However, these two sub-categories are completely interconnected. PSI, as described by Colliander and Dahlén (2011) helps readers create a relationship with bloggers, or at least the illusion of a close personal, even intimate, relationship between blogger and reader. Through their content, bloggers offer readers a framed look into their own lives and what makes them who they are, something that is most often shared between close friends. As evidenced in section 4.2, readers hold the opinions of bloggers they follow in high regard, and coupled with this illusion of friendship, the bloggers turn into a reader's

'fashionable friend.' As evidenced by P3, "The person behind the blog, however they are benefiting from the blog itself, is important."

However, the relationship formed between blogger and reader is frail, and easy to break; should the blogger become inauthentic or biased, or post opinions that readers deem to be lacking in truth, the blogger will lose credibility. Tarnished credibility "would be devastating for a blogger. As the sender is an integral part of the message in social media, blog readers would react more strongly to a perceived drop in credibility" (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011, p.316). It is interesting to note that Sedeke and Arora (2013) found that bloggers themselves have actually been found to have a mistrust of those working in the industry, finding them to have 'traits such as elitism and the inability of independent unbiased thinking," and could be seen as the reason that they begin blogging in the first place: to find others in a community that enjoy or have opinions about fashion and style but are not experts, and are looking for 'friends' to discuss it with.

It is for these reasons that bloggers, including those in the Fashion Blogger TV show, emphasized the point of working only with brands that fit their own personalities and personal brands. Without followers, career bloggers would be another voice on the internet among the other millions of blogs. Thus, it is within their best interested to be as relatable as possible to keep readers interested. In the model, relatability is seen as coming from the *perceived status* theme and directly linked to opinions, but is also related to the content under *blog factors and qualities*. To be viewed as relatable, bloggers must possess other factors that readers deem important instead of just being seen as a friend. Even as bloggers gain status, if their opinions and content remain relatable and personal to the followers that they already have and to potential new followers, the blogger will

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still remain a credible source for information and be viewed as trustworthy by readers.

4.4 Perceived Status: Status = Trust

"As blogging activity has increased, a hierarchy based on

readership and popularity of blogs has developed among

the personal publishers, creating an 'A-List' blog."

(Trammel & Keshelashvili, 2005)

These A-list, or high-status, bloggers as described early in section 1b. change annually, but are looked at based on ad revenue, blog sponsorships, and social media followings. An analysis of comments on articles about A-list bloggers (Schiffer, 2015; Sherman, 2015; Kliest, 2015), brought about assumptions to the research that, although readers of blogs were impressed with the success that the bloggers had amassed, their high status made them unrelatable and less trustworthy once the blogger began getting paid for their posts. Considering the backlash from stakeholders towards sites with a vested interest towards business (Flanagin and Metzger, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Senecal and Nantel, 2004), and in accordance with the comments on the above articles, the researcher was surprised by the answers received from the participants in the survey.

The survey questions looked into whether participants were more likely to follow a blogger that had already amassed a large following, if they believed that blogger opinions were still trustworthy knowing that they made a career from their sites (the survey participants were given information on how much money some high-status bloggers make), and if they would continue to follow these bloggers even while knowing about their economic gains. Before being asked these questions, the participants were given information as follows:

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"It is now common for fashion bloggers to make a career out of

running their site. Some bloggers make hundreds of thousands,

or even millions of dollars in revenue through partnerships and

projects, and are gifted with expensive clothes, products and

worldwide travel. Many of these bloggers now have assistants,

photographers and makeup artists to help them maintain their blogs."

The primary information taken was that the participants would be more likely to follow the high-status bloggers that already had a large online following.

"I am…more likely to follow an already established blogger with

many followers because their blogs often seem more professional…"

Participant 19

"[They] may be more reliable and consistent in posting."

Participant 20

"It means they probably have something to show for it. If they've

gained so many followers they must be doing something right."

Participant 24

Though not fully indicative of trust in itself, the participants did maintain that they would choose to follow the high-status bloggers due their perceived 'popularity'. This initial knowledge helps the research move into the next question of the trustworthiness of these high-status bloggers.

As shown by table 4.4.1, the participants were adamant that the opinions of perceived high status bloggers would still be seen as trustworthy, as long as certain conditions were met in order to keep the 'relationship' between blogger and reader.

Table 4.4.1
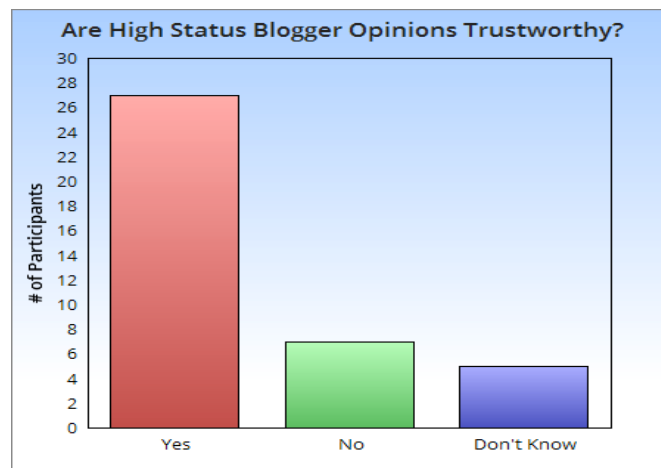
Some of the participants who felt that the bloggers' opinions would be less trustworthy as their status raised very little information to explain their opinions, thus the researcher had to make inferences that their responses were due exclusively to the information given before these questions, and were not based on the participant thinking of a particular blogger that they themselves read in their own free time. The participants that did include reasons but still found that bloggers would be less trustworthy or didn't know based their ideas on the factors of relatability, and that with a higher salary comes a higher budget, and while this opens up more professional pathways for the blogger and content, it creates a break or a disconnect between some readers and bloggers, perhaps as perceived communication with readers diminishes as reader numbers and comment sections grow.

However, the vast majority of respondents found that the bloggers opinion would remain trustworthy as long as the reader was aware of the perceived status

of the blogger through transparent posts and open, honest information. As P3 asked, "to communicate, and to become so efficient at communication that you are able to solely live off the thoughts in your mind. If their 'communication' becomes liked by a mass population, how does that make it less trustworthy?" Likewise, P24 stated that the bloggers 'must be doing something right' in order to gain so many followers and have so many people trust their opinions. From this, the researcher found that the relationship between perceived status and reader trust was linked; if a blogger is found to be trustworthy, in their opinions their status will 'rise', and those bloggers with a high status will be found as trustworthy, as long as they are seen as honest and open with their readers. It seemed that participants even thought, contrary to the previous analysis of comments on Schiffer's (2015) article, that high-status bloggers are actually seen as more trustworthy to readers. This is also illustrated quantitatively with the help of table 4.4.2, when participants were asked if they would continue to follow high-status bloggers with the information they had received (end of p. 39). The overwhelming majority would still support and follow these bloggers, knowing that they were making a career out of their sites.

Table 4.4.2
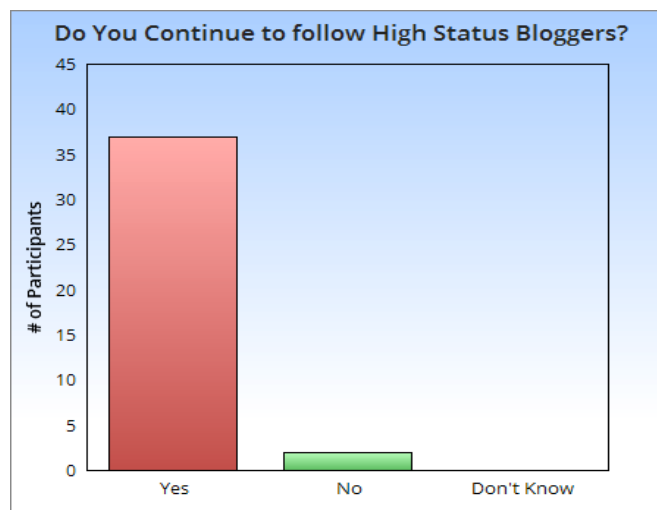
"It can be a job like any other. But their own opinion should still

 be the most important thing about their blog."

Participant 2

"They all started somewhere and weren't famous in the beginning.

 It took time and hard work to get to where some of them are now."

Participant 12

"I think it is cool that they can live of their hobbies. The blogger

 will only blog and say yes to the thinks she likes."

Participant 18

"If not more trustworthy - if they're found to be fraudulent they're

 only jeopardizing their own careers."

Participant 22

As illustrated by model 4.1, and expressed in participant responses, readers are actually impressed by the status achieved by bloggers making a career out of their opinions because of their rise from amateur to career-blogger without professional background. The codes also pointed to the link between the relatability of blogger to reader and the blogger's opinions; the participants in the survey expressed a feeling of pride for bloggers as one would with a close friend. Thus, a blogger's status affects their trust, which is affected by a mixture of perceived expertise of the blogger, opinions and relatability. Bloggers can not seem to be able to achieve and continue to hold status without also readers perceiving them to possess these former factors, though it is possible to possess those factors without achieving status.

4.4.1 Sponsored Content

Along these lines, the question of sponsored content was also raised. From the researcher's personal experiences and the initial analysis of the collected data along with previous research done by academics, the idea of sponsored content was a negative one where readers felt as though they were being tricked. As Zhu and Tan (2007) explain, "if the content of the blog crosses the line into traditional advertising, the blogger could experience a backlash from the audience they may feel fools and no longer trust the blog as it contains ulterior advertising".

By creating a feeling of trust with readers through perceived transparency and honesty about their opinions, bloggers can make a living without jeopardizing their readership, because readers value their opinions and relatability to the reader through their para-social interaction. By maintaining this friendship, the sponsored content that the bloggers post, especially if it is a brand that fits into the bloggers 'lifestyle' or 'personality', helps the brand sponsoring the content to become a pseudo-friend or object that the reader and blogger may hold in common with each other.

4.5 Perceived Status: Expertise

The initial understanding of expertise for the researcher was a background (such as job or any credentials that would qualify them as an expert) or educational expertise in the area of fashion. Although expertise is not limited in credibility assessments, for the purpose of this study expertise was defined as a background as described above or above-average knowledge of the fashion world. The participants were asked whether this 'expertise' was important for a blogger to have and if it made their opinions more credible. During the research phase, the

source credibility theory made it clear that expertise was one of the key points in determining whether a source was credible. However, the term expertise for fashion bloggers might be better changed for or used in addition to the terms 'knowledgeable' (from Kang, 2010) or 'high competence'.

> "Definitely [still trust their opinions]. A lot of the bloggers I found actually started blogging as a hobby before it turned into a career. I don't think their POV has changed a bit. Now they just get paid to blog."
>
> *Participant 23*

> "Yes - these bloggers didn't start off with a career in fashion/style blogging. They made a career with their opinions and that's why people read their blogs. If they lose that, they will also lose their followers."
>
> *Participant 38*

> "I actually prefer more 'normal' people. I can't relate to couture fashionistas."
>
> *Participant 4*

The participants noted that many high-status bloggers had made their careers off of their opinions, and only gained experience within the fashion realm because they were known from their blogs, and not the other way around. As one participant explained, style and creativity can be taught, but are more inherent in people, and thus it is not necessary (as shown in Table 4.5.1) to be studied extensively or worked with to be able to give knowledgeable, yet still relatable, opinions about clothing, beauty and style.

Table 4.5.1
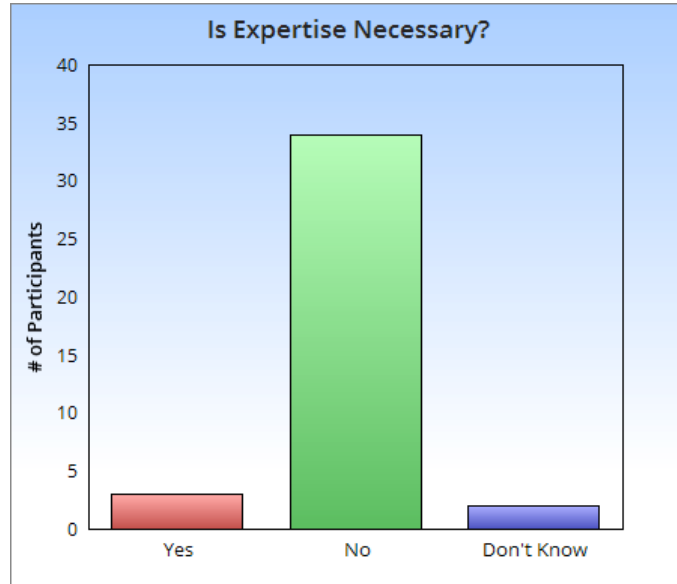
By exchanging the word expertise for knowledgeable, the term can be related back around again to opinions and relatability. The opinions of the blogger are knowledgeable or else she wouldn't have any followers, and are relatable, as many bloggers build from the ground up instead of starting with high budgets and teams to help produce the content. Readers acknowledge that many of these bloggers are very similar to themselves and can relate to them on both a socio-demographic and personal level.

4.6 Discussion

The factors found in this study can all be categorized under the two main themes of the source credibility theory: 1) assessments of information quality and accuracy and 2) judgements of source's trustworthiness and expertise. Although the study acknowledges that this theory was the initial starting point when research on credibility was started, along with previously recorded blogger credibility assessment factors, the findings were a surprise. Assumptions based primarily on the theory would infer that the credibility of high-status bloggers would either begin on a lower level than other bloggers, or would fall once the

bloggers reached a perceived 'status'. These assumptions were kept in mind throughout the data analysis, along with the patterns from previous credibility research. However, throughout the research and analysis phase of the study, the coded factors didn't seem to form any types of patterns that could be explained by theory. Once refinement of the code words had been considered, there were very obvious patterns that struck the researcher, and as the operational model was drawn out and the themes were linked, it became clear that these patterns could be explained by the source credibility theory. By answering SQ1, this research helped to reveal that source credibility is still relevant in digital times, perhaps even more than before, and found important sub-factors for the 'fashion blog' category of source. By creating Model 4.1 and showing how the factors are all inter-related, one can see that for blog credibility, high-status bloggers should encompass some, if not all, of these important factors in order to maintain trust with their readers.

By taking the source credibility theory and developing it further for different fields, research into these areas can be more in depth, and also taken even farther. The researcher believes that, in the realm of opinion-based consumer blogs (not limited to fashion), the sub-factors discussed in the previous analysis should be seen as important when studying and determining credibility of bloggers. Though many factors are similar to those of Rubin and Liddy (2006) and Kang (2010), this researcher believes that *relatability*, similar to Rubin and Liddy's *personal connection* - though this is more along the lines of actually knowing the person (as a friend or family member; a relationship in real life) rather than PSI- should be its own factor. Content should also be a factor in and of itself when determining credibility of a blogger, as well as having its own category like Kang's (2010)

content credibility determination, though this was not necessary for this particular study. The professional quality of the content was extremely important to participants in this survey, and should be regarded as extremely important now that bloggers are such a large part of the fashion world. Without 'professional' content and design of the blog, readers are less likely to become a follower, or even read a blog in the first place. By expanding the factors of blogger credibility, researchers and practitioners alike may have a better idea of how participants may view blogs in the future, and should be considered as both the theory and blogging world develop in the future. As the blogosphere has grown quickly, the factors that were important before have expanded themselves, and researchers need to acknowledge this in order to fully understand the meanings and understandings of credibility from readers the future. It should be noted, however, that these factors will not be the norm for all blogs, such as political news blogs, as these are judged on different factors and should be treated as their own channel. For the study of consumer-related blogs, however, and the credibility factors that bloggers should have, the source credibility theory and appropriate models should be expanded and developed for research purposes.

For operationalization purposes, considering what the research questions were looking for, the researcher believes that one of the most interesting findings of this study is that the credibility of bloggers does not fall once their status is perceived to have risen. In fact, the opposite seems to be true for almost all of the participants of this research. As stated, the assumptions of source credibility scholars would have been that high-status blogger credibility would have fallen to a level similar to business based websites (or blogs run by companies) once readers had the understanding that the blogger was making a career out of their

site. But, as shown with perceived transparency (honesty, openness and authenticity), participants felt that these bloggers actually would be considered more credible and trustworthy, as dishonesty or obvious bias would be detrimental to the blogger.

On one hand, this information is beneficial for blogger, reader and practitioner working with the bloggers, as this trust helps to form relationships with brands (that the blogger might work with) and their readers. On the other hand, credibility should be viewed cautiously. Though these bloggers are seen as somewhat 'amateur experts', there is now a distinct line between peer recommendation and expert recommendation, with bloggers mixing into all of those levels, from peer- and low-status to high-status and celebrity bloggers, with varying readerships. To reach the right audience, practitioners should focus rather on the readership that the blogger reaches than their perceived status in order to make sure that the message is reaching the relevant publics and that the brand fits with the bloggers 'status', so as to make sure the blogger is as open and relatable to the audience as possible, focusing on the illusion of friendship that the readers have. As shown by this research, readers are well aware of the work that goes in to maintaining a blog, and what bloggers receive from their work - it is a job like any other, and bloggers get 'paid' in a variety of ways. So, the practitioner or partnering brand must view their consumers as intelligent and also not try to fool them in partnering with the 'wrong' blogger, as this could also be detrimental for the brand.

5. Conclusion
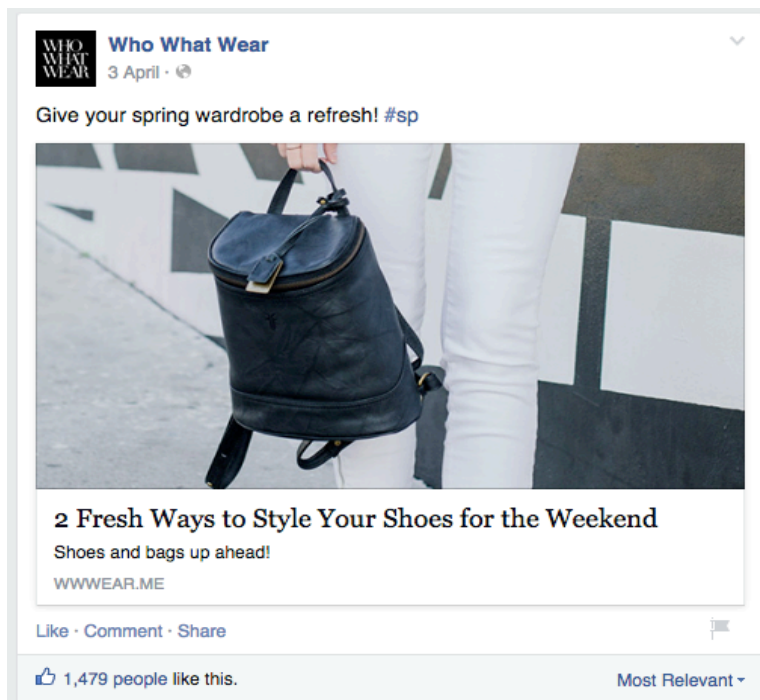
(Who What Wear, 2015)

The Age of the Blogger does not seem to be coming to an end anytime soon. If anything, it seems to be growing and gaining in popularity faster than other forms of mixed marketing techniques. As new spokespeople and self-made celebrities, bloggers are starting their own businesses and earning money by being creative and turning what may have once been a hobby into a full-blown career. As social media grows, it is increasingly important for PR practitioners and marketers to both realize the potential pros and cons for working with such an instant form of communication, and how partnering with the right 'influencer' could deem their communication plans effective or not.

However, as with anything that gains popularity so quickly, new rules and regulations are put in place to make sure that brands, agencies and bloggers

themselves are being fair to consumers who help them earn by listening to their opinions and making purchases based on their suggestions.

These fashion world influencers have brands and agencies taking full advantage of their popular opinion. As recently as April 3, 2015, Lord & Taylor hired 50 bloggers to post pictures of themselves on their blog's Instagram profiles wearing dress from the brands 'Design Lab'. Some of the posts garnered upwards of 5,000 likes, while one post even gained 13,000; the dress sold out shortly after the campaign launched.

However, according to US Federal Trade Commission guidelines (Federal Trade Commission, 2013), these bloggers didn't state that they were paid by Lord & Taylor to post the pictures, though some did go back after the initial fallout by marketing watchdogs to add information that these pictures were sponsored posts (Beck, 2015), with similar hashtags to #sp from Who What Wear (2015), shown above. Though a possible issue for bloggers and brands, these guidelines now make it harder for the line between advertising or sponsored posts and original content by bloggers to be blurred. This means that bloggers and brands will have to be even more transparent and honest about how they are earning money through their blogs and how the brands are choosing to share information with their publics. From the information provided by participants during this research, by complying with the new rules and regulations, and still open about this, readers will likely still find bloggers to be a credible source and no harm will be done to their reputations, creating a stronger relationship between blogger and reader, and, consequently, reader and brand.

However, as readers begin to realize that regulations may be the main (or occasionally the only) reason for transparency of certain information from bloggers, the question of credibility could rise again. It would also be interesting to examine how readers were affected by bloggers for Lord & Taylor who added the "#ad" or "sponsored post" information to their Instagram posts after the news about the breach of FTC guidelines, and whether readers felt that bloggers should have been honest from the beginning. Fashion journalists have also begun to question the importance of some types of social media and have discussed how important Instagram is to fashion bloggers; some bloggers don't even have their own website, and just use Instagram to connect with readers and brands. This channel, though similar in its general field of social media, is worth researching in terms of source credibility, as the personal brand developed for a photo-sharing based platform is different than a 'personal journal' blog.

While the data collected in this study may not be generalizable for the entire blogging world, it is worth noting the responses by participants and how these could in turn affect communication plans. As social media continues to grow and types of content continue to amass, both PR practitioners and marketers need to familiarize themselves with these types of content in order to stay up to date with their publics. However, the types of media channels chosen should directly relate to the overall feel of the brand, and not just because consumers are on it. The new popularity of the photo-sharing app Snapchat is a good example; bloggers and brands use the app to share 'stories' (videos and photos) of their days and events they attend, but in an extremely personal way, with more of a 'backstage' feel than in blog

posts. The videos appear grainy and the majority of posts are intended to be capturing the feelings of 'fun' and 'adventure' that some brands may not fit in to. While some companies now have 'channels' and are sharing commercially driven content, others may not suit this form of social media. However, should this brand then partner with a blogger that is prominent on the app, they could still be featured on the blogger's Snapchat stories, thus reaching more followers than they would have before on a different channel.

In conclusion, the fashion blogging phenomenon does not seem to be slowing down at any time, with blogs being created and shared incredibly quickly. By harnessing the power of this channel, bloggers, practitioners and brands have the opportunity to spread their messages in a positive way and form relationships with readers and consumers all over the world. The importance of blogging should not be overlooked or taken for granted; the credibility of a high-status blogger could make or break a brand that wants to reach even more people, and practitioners must realize the influence of this medium and how all parties involved can benefit from blogger relations, and thus use it to the best of their abilities.

6. Appendices

Appendix A

From the Fashionista Article: The 20 Most Influential Personal Style Bloggers Right Now

Based on:

1. **Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest followers**, as well as **website traffic**.

2. **Brand extensions.**

3. **It factor.** 'Through talks with industry insiders about whom advertisers love right now, and who is moving the most products via affiliate links.'

4. **Google News searches.** Headline makers were rewarded for extending their reach beyond their own network.

1. Chiara Ferragni
2. Aimee Song
3. Wendy Nguyen
4. Kristina Bazan
5. Julie Sariñana
6. Rumi Neely
7. Nicole Warne
8. Blaire Eadie
9. Julia Engel
10. Nicolette Mason
11. Shea Marie
12. Bryanboy
13. Elin Kling
14. Zanita Whittington
15. Gabi Gregg
16. Danielle Bernstein
17. Jessica Stein
18. Susanna Lau
19. Chriselle Lim
20. Jane Aldridge

Appendix B

Link to survey: https://suzilindquist.typeform.com/to/oYRCqZ

Survey questions

The first eight questions asked for demographic information, whether the participant kept a blog, if it was a style blog, how long they have been reading blogs, and permission to use quotes from responses in the text of this thesis.

1. Why do you read fashion and style blogs?

2. How do you find new blogs to read?

   a. For example: recommendation, link from another site, social media, etc.

3. When coming across a blog you've never read before, what initially attracts you to it? For example, do you know the person, are they from your city/country, look like you or share your style, etc.

   a. Please feel free to give any reasons you can think of.

4. What factors make you a follower of a blogger after your first visit?

   a. Please give any and all factors you can think of (e.g. aesthetics, style, opinions, etc.)

5. Is it important to you for a blogger to have professional qualifications or a background in fashion? How important is a bloggers 'expertise' or knowledge of the fashion world and style to you?

6. Would you be more likely to follow a blogger that has already amassed a large following? Why?

7. A blogger posts sponsored content and gains commissions from links (but is open about this information). How does this affect the way you feel about this blogger?

8. What kind of information do you look for in posts from bloggers?

a. For example, do you prefer posts that are photo-based, or do you like posts that are text-based?

9. If you prefer text, what sort of information do you look for?

a. Opinions, 'journal-like' entries, etc.? Please feel free to include any examples that you can think of.

Information: It is now common for fashion bloggers to make a career out of running their site. Some bloggers make hundreds of thousands, or even millions of dollars in revenue through partnerships and projects, and are gifted with expensive clothes, products and worldwide travel. Many of these bloggers now have assistants, photographers and makeup artists to help them maintain their blogs.

10. With this information, do you continue to read these blogs? Why or why not?

11. Knowing that these bloggers make a career out of their site, do you still find their opinions and posts as trustworthy? Why or why not?

12. You come across two bloggers with similar style; one blogger is a known career blogger, while the other is less known with fewer followers. Would you follow one over the other, or both? Why?

13. If you have any other comments, please write them below. All responses are appreciated!

Sample Survey Screen

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