This post is sponsored but all opinions are my own: does fashion blogging offer an authentic voice? An investigation into the credibility of fashion blogger sponsored content and blogger perspectives on the tensions between authenticity and commercialisation.

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of commercial sponsorship upon fashion blogging, a form of digital communication that has become important in influencing online consumer behaviour. Fashion companies appreciate the marketing value of blogs and have utilised them to their own advantage. As a result, the fashion blogosphere has become increasingly commercialised. Existing research into changes in fashion blogging has generally focused upon the attitudes and perspectives of blog readers. Relatively little research investigates the attitude of fashion bloggers themselves. This thesis therefore specifically examines the attitudes of UK fashion bloggers as regards the impact of commercial sponsorship upon their practice and on the credibility and authenticity of their blog output.

This study takes an interpretative, qualitative research approach with a combination of an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. It focuses upon over 300 fashion bloggers divided into three distinct groups: young and old active bloggers and significantly a third group of bloggers who have discontinued the activity.

A review of existing literature identified a number of key areas for exploration: the effect of sponsorship upon blogger motivation, design and content of blog output, the pressures upon bloggers resulting from accepting sponsorship rewards, blogger perception of the impact that commercialisation may have had upon their practice values, the potential effect of sponsorship upon their relationship with readers, their views on the changing status of the fashion blogosphere and their role as fashion bloggers.

The findings offer a number of new perspectives upon the evolving fashion-blog sector, especially with reference to the following themes: the personal pressures felt by some fashion bloggers as a consequence of their involvement with commercial partnerships and the negative impact that this can have upon their mental health; the increased discrepancy between the ways in which fashion bloggers talk about their practice and the reality of their actual online behaviour as regards disclosure of sponsored material, self-censorship and reluctance to be critical; the increased priority that many fashion bloggers now place upon commercial opportunities rather than their relationship with readers.

This research is of significance as it has explored the tensions affecting fashion blogger attitudes and practice from their own point of view. It has specifically analysed the general decline of social community in the fashion blogosphere and the impact that this has had upon the authenticity and credibility of the fashion blogger voice.

Keywords: *Fashion Blogging, Blogosphere, Sponsorship, Authenticity, Credibility, Blog Motivations, Commercial Partnerships, Online Influencers.*

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Chapter One: Introduction

Online communities and social networks have become an accepted and integrated part of modern life, have changed the way in which individuals communicate and have had profound effect on business practices. Through digital platforms such as blogs, individuals have the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas, express opinions and communicate with others who may have similar beliefs, goals and values (Wellman *et al*, 2020). In particular, growth in computer ownership and accessibility to the internet and technology has created a new class of online influencers which includes bloggers (Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Mora and Rocamora, 2015). Blogs have therefore become one of the most attractive online media available to digital marketers today and have been described as influencing the 'digital interactive transformation of marketing' (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2008:2).

Blogs began to be popular online tools throughout the 1990s and offered an opportunity for individuals to share links, commentary and opinions with others on the internet (Blood, 2000; Chua and Chang, 2016). Over time, blogs developed into diary-like formats where the blog owner e.g. blogger, shared aspects of their personal life with their readers. In theory, bloggers have a significant amount of freedom in terms of personal expression; they can choose which subjects to write about and can offer objective and/or subjective opinions and attitudes (Findlay, 2015). As a result of this freedom, bloggers have the ability to serve as connecting communicators, alerting peers and their blog readers to current social and consumer issues, events, trends and choices, as well as sharing their own personal insights, interests and personality (Crewe, 2013; Marwick, 2013).

One of the key drivers of the growth in size and influence of the online blog sector, known as the blogosphere, has been the perception shared by bloggers and blog readers alike that blogs are a generally trustworthy medium. They have seemed particularly independent when compared to pre-existing forms of product advertisement and placement, which have been known to be heavily influenced, if not controlled, by commercial industry (Zain, Perry and Quinn, 2018; Hagan, 2020). Additionally, part of the popular success of blogs was the perception that they were 'trusted information sources' written by 'real people' i.e. fellow

consumers offering helpful and honest evaluations of products and companies (Pihl, 2013a; Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie, 2017).

Rocamora (2012) notes how, in the earlier phase of the blogosphere, bloggers were often initially perceived as providing impartial information that was less subject to commercial influence and manipulation. Typically, by offering trusted advice and unbiased product recommendations, individual bloggers often developed into innovative opinion leaders with considerable influence over their immediate 'online audience' (Mortara and Roberti, 2017; Whitmer, 2020). The interactivity and engagement between the author and readers that can take place on a blog, has also contributed greatly to their popularity (Mutum, 2011; Dumont and Ots, 2020). As a result, blogs have grown immensely in influence and have contributed to the overall shift from traditional forms of marketing and advertising towards digital media (Kim *et al*, 2020).

In its initial phase, blogging was often seen as a 'hobbyist' phenomenon that was, to a considerable extent, characterised by a communitarian ethic. The perception of consumer independence from industry control was a key element in establishing blogger credibility and their influence in the eyes of their readership (Cane, 2017; Glucksman, 2017). In certain market sectors, such as fashion, blogging in this early period also represented a particularly persuasive alternative to the existing industry-controlled channels of product information, evaluation and promotion (Wright, 2017; Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018).

Blogs have disrupted the traditional structure of fashion industry advertising and commentary which was under 'top-down' control. Their easy availability made the creation and distribution of fashion opinion more accessible and relevant to everyday consumers (Lockie, 2019; Konstantopoulou *et al*, 2019). Fashion blogs have allowed individuals the opportunity to engage more directly with the global fashion industry, a development praised by many fashion researchers for democratizing conversations surrounding fashion and style (Khamis and Munt, 2010; Pham, 2011; Duffy, 2013).

Over time, the potential ability of fashion bloggers to influence their target audience's attitudes, perceptions and purchase behaviour made them a powerful marketing tool as well as an important channel for fashion retail companies in

search of new outlets and opportunities to connect with specific audiences (Jung, Kim and Kim, 2014; Gunawan and Iskandar, 2020). These companies are aware that contemporary consumers tend to place more trust in the opinions of bloggers who appear to be similar to themselves, than in conventional forms of advertising. Fashion-industry marketers have increasingly appreciated that blogs play an influential role in the processing of advertisement messages, creating consumer conversations and shaping purchase intentions (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Thakur, 2018).

In particular, the original relationship of trust between author and reader tended to give blog-based advice a credibility that was more difficult to achieve and sustain through the use of conventional forms of advertising (Abidin, 2016; Yang *et al*, 2019). Once this was recognised, companies increasingly identified influential fashion bloggers who had demonstrated the ability to build a solid following in order to collaborate with them, via advertising and/or product placement (Williams, 2019). Budgets formerly devoted to print media and television have increasingly been diverted to supporting and developing blog-based advertisements (Hu, 2015; Cano, Doyle and Zhang, 2018). This development has been especially marked in the fashion industry, a sector where aspects of blogging such as word-of-mouth consumer advice are paramount but where personal fashion blogs have undergone significant commercialisation (Rossi, 2016; Montecchi and Nobbs 2017).

Companies have therefore increasingly collaborated with influential fashion bloggers who can demonstrate the ability to share their brand experiences on a regular basis to a solid following of readers (Yu and Kim, 2020). Blogs are now enabling new models of consumer collaboration and consumer-generated advertising which has created alternative commercial pathways for businesses towards their target consumers. As companies have realised the powerful influence that blogs exert upon consumer behaviour, there has been a growing trend towards the commercialisation of blogs. This has especially been the case as regards personal fashion blogs (Esposito *et al*, 2015; Ferreira and Vasconcelos, 2017; Williams, 2019).

As early as 2008-2010, there were growing signs of commercialisation within the fashion blog sector, with an increasing number of fashion bloggers being offered lucrative opportunities to collaborate with companies in different ways such as paid display advertisements featuring in the side bar of their blog, being paid to produce sponsored content and/or being sent free items to showcase to blog readers (Hall, 2017; Hanusch, Banjac and Maares, 2019).

As a result of these growing monetary opportunities, many fashion bloggers have been able to forge careers through their blog and supporting social-media channels (Hänninen, 2016). A well-known example of this is Chiara Ferragni, the Italian creator of 'The Blonde Salad'. Through commercial advertisements, financial sponsorship and the production of her own blog-branded products, Ferragni now enjoys an estimated $10 million annual turnover (Rocamora, 2018; Goanta and Ranchordás, 2020). In 2015, Ferragni's blog was also selected as a case study at Harvard Business School, as an example of how a blog can be successfully monetarised and transformed into a personal brand (Keinan *et al*, 2015; Sanderson, 2019).

The opportunities for mass exposure and financial reward that can be achieved through blogging have had an impact on the size and character of the blogosphere: many studies note that the motivation to blog has changed over time (Marwick, 2014; Jablonska and Sniegula*,* 2017; Mutum *et al*, 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020). In the last decade, common motivating forces for new entrants to the blogosphere have been potentially lucrative, commercial rewards and/or projecting a more professional online persona and CV (Fullwood *et al*, 2015; Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie, 2017; Hall, 2017).

Some researchers have viewed the growing commercialisation of the fashion blogosphere as a positive development and have argued that the shift from amateur online diary to professional marketing tool has helped to revolutionise and democratise the online fashion sector (Marwick, 2013; Keinan *et al*, 2015; Jablonska and Sniegula*,* 2017). In contrast, this commercial development of a once-perceived impartial activity has also attracted the attention of many academics and industry professionals who argue that the introduction of commercial involvement, such as sponsorship, has weakened the original credibility and authentic values that initially sparked the growth and popularity of

the general blogosphere (Meder, 2011; Manikonda *et al*, 2015; Mutum *et al,* 2018). It has also brought about a growing ambiguity within the fashion blogging sector between expected behaviour and actual practice.

This commercialisation of the blogosphere has also raised questions about its authenticity and credibility, leading to considerable attention from researchers (Halvorsen *et al*, 2013: Abidin and Ots, 2017). An area of particular interest to them has been the extent to which the increase of advertising and product sponsorship on blogs has had an impact upon their credibility, and the extent to which this development has affected consumer perception of the value and independence of blogger recommendations (Hansson, 2015: Hwang and Jeong, 2016: Neal, 2017). Some commentators have highlighted the tensions that fashion bloggers can particularly face in the areas of ethical perspectives, authenticity, legitimacy and honesty as a result of increased sponsorship and advertising in the blogosphere: 'it is at the point where readers can smell the sponsorship, that integrity gets lost' (Medine-Cohen, 2014:1).

As a result, a number of studies have argued that it is becoming difficult to make clear distinctions between paid and non-paid blog content (James, 2017; Abidin and Ots, 2017). Some academics have noted the lack of advertising disclosure within the blog sector (Cheng and Fang, 2015; Eisend *et al*, 2020; Wellman *et al*, 2020), whilst others have questioned the effectiveness of current blog advertising regulations outlined by the Advertising Standards Agency (Khuong, 2016; Reale, 2019). Others have noted the personal tensions that bloggers can experience from increased commercial involvement and trying to meet the differing expectations of sponsors and readers (Duffy, 2017; Koivista, 2019).

These developments therefore raise fundamental questions concerning the impact of commercialisation upon the fashion blog sector: to what extent have fashion bloggers simply become puppets of corporate marketing or do they perceive themselves as sources of bona-fide product and brand evaluation?

1.1 This specific study

This study was designed to examine and analyse the perspectives of UK fashion bloggers in respect of the credibility of the sponsored content that appears in their blog output. There were several key elements to this approach: the opinion of fashion bloggers on how the inclusion of sponsored content might affect their own perceptions of their role as a blogger, their relationship with commercial companies, and their potential obligation to their readership community. As such, this study has specifically considered whether the increased use of sponsored material has changed fashion bloggers' perception of their own authenticity and credibility as a blogger.

The study aimed to assess the extent to which fashion bloggers felt and reflected upon tensions resulting from their involvement in more commercialised activities. These included possible pressures from companies upon bloggers to be positive about featured products, and/or receiving negative feedback from blog readers as a result of featuring commercial blog material (Safitri, 2017; Williams, 2019). It also aimed to understand the extent to which their blog output was affected by commercial considerations, and the extent to which they had reflected upon the impact that commercial obligations have had on their role and perception as trustworthy, legitimate commentators in the fashion blogosphere.

The study initially concentrated on identifying a group of current bloggers who were active within the UK fashion blogosphere, and who had incorporated commercial involvement such as sponsorship within their blog output. For purposes of appropriate comparison, the members of the group were selected in terms of their age profile. This provided the opportunity to investigate whether there were discernible similarities and/or differences between the attitudes of younger and older fashion bloggers when it came to the themes under consideration. Furthermore, the research participants included a group of UK fashion bloggers who had decided to suspend and/or end their blogging activities. This group was included in the study to help identify the extent to which the increased use of sponsorship in the overall fashion blogosphere might have impacted on their blogging activity. Further rationale for the selection of these research participants can be found within the methodology chapter.

1.2 Research Rationale and Originality

Although blogs have a relatively short history, there is a wealth of research that has focused upon examining the online blogosphere. For example, many academics have been interested in examining different areas and industries across the general blogosphere. However, the majority of recent studies have tended to investigate attitudes to these phenomena from the point of view of blog readers and general consumers, rather than blog authors themselves. For example, the work of Kelly, Kerr and Drennan (2008), Jin and Villegas (2009), Ferreira *et al* (2017), Mutum *et al* (2018) and Rachbini and Hatta (2018) into the involvement into the incursion of advertising and sponsorship into blogs only examined the reaction of blog readers to this development.

Of relevance to the current study are those researchers who have examined the perceived authenticity of blog material in different sectors across the general blogosphere such as Rahman (2017), Ay *et al* (2019) and Duffy and Kang (2020) who studied travel bloggers, Kim and Johnson (2012), Johnson and Kaye (2014), Gaden and Dumitrica (2015) and Piotrowski (2017), who investigated political bloggers, and Gannon and Prothero (2016), Wright (2017), Tran and Nguyen (2020), who evaluated the authenticity of beauty bloggers. Other studies have examined the perception of industry professionals in public relations and journalism towards blog authenticity (Banning and Sweetser, 2007; Cane, 2017; Hanusch, Banjac and Maares, 2019). Other current research on blog sponsorship and blog author credibility has also tended to examine these topics within differing industries, such as the fitness industry (Neal, 2017; Noonan, 2018), Beauty (Rahmi, Sekarasih and Sjabadhyni, 2016; Gnegy, 2017) and travel (Tan and Chang, 2016; Terttunen, 2017: Baruah, 2017). Research into blog sponsorship has also investigated its use on different social-media channels such as YouTube (Dehghani *et al*, 2016; Riboni, 2017; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), Twitter (Thoms, 2013; Cole, 2015; Okazaki *et al*, 2019), Facebook (McKinney, Kelly and Duran, 2012; Winter *et al*, 2014; Brettel *et al*, 2015) and Instagram (Amelina and Zhu, 2016; Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Lee and Kim, 2020). Others such as Petersen (2014); Hunter (2017), Orton-Johnson (2017) and Mäkinen (2018) have also looked at sponsorship in the influential Motherhood sector of the blogosphere.

Again, these studies tended to focus for the most part upon responses made by blog readers and consumers, rather than the views of blog authors themselves.

Several recent studies have been more specifically interested in the concepts of authenticity, trustworthiness, credibility and blogger motivation and legitimacy within the context of fashion blogging e.g. Pham (2011), Phil (2013a), Marwick (2013), Findlay (2015), Williams and Hodges (2016), Simunic (2017), Rocamora (2018) and Whitmer (2020). As with the general industry-wide studies identified above, some of these studies have again largely tended to examine these themes through the perspective of blog readers rather than bloggers. Overall, relatively little work seems to have focussed on the attitudes of fashion bloggers towards issues such as featuring sponsored content in their output.

Several commentators have examined the concepts of credibility and authenticity across the online marketing sector and have identified several key traits that influence blog readers when making judgements about the trustworthiness of blogs. These include a palpable sense of truthful expression, a connection with and responsiveness to the audience, and an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands (Marwick, 2013; Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn, 2017; Faleatua, 2018). Other valuable aspects in the eyes of blog readers include blog author expertise, attractiveness, likeability and general trustworthiness (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011; Johnson and Kaye, 2013; Dekavalla, 2020). Research has suggested that the greatly increased use of sponsored commercial material in recent years has had a marked impact on the way in which blog readers view the trustworthiness of authors (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018; Visentin, Pizzi and Pichierri, 2019; Yu and Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, there is a need to investigate the extent to which fashion bloggers themselves are aware of the tensions raised by these developments and the ways in which they may have adapted their blog output in consequence.

Online marketing and sales have continued to grow and now dominate global commercial advertising. Blogs have a significant presence in this marketplace. Although difficult to pinpoint an exact figure, in 2020 three popular sites, WordPress, Blogger and Tumblr, alone hosted an estimated 600 million registered blogs, although many of these may have become dormant (Petrov, 2020). As a result, the influence of blogs has grown immensely and contributed to the overall

shift from traditional forms of marketing and advertising towards the use of digital media. It is not just the size of the online market that makes research into it important but the fact that it involves new ways of reaching customers and of selling to them are continuing to evolve (Boateng and Okoe, 2015; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019).

Understanding how and why the fashion blogosphere changes and develops is a valid area of study for both academic researchers and digital marketers alike. Blogging continues to be a prominent, ever-growing addition to advertising practices, and the influence that bloggers can have over their readers, particularly in terms of purchase behaviour, will continue to be of interest (Hajli *et al*, 2017; Lin *et al*, 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). In addition, the commercialization of the fashion blogosphere has promoted practices that range from the questionable to the deceptive, such as the non-disclosure of gifted items and the purchase of fake followers (Josefsson, Rougie and Verboom, 2017; Wellman *et al*, 2020).

Investigating the attitudes of active UK fashion bloggers to these developments is therefore a contribution to understanding the pressures and tensions felt in an evolving fashion market. It is also of value to investigate the opinions of varying age groups of fashion bloggers to determine whether there are any discernible similarities and/or differences in their views. To date, the researcher is aware of only one current article that focuses upon the differing views of online influencers in terms of their age profile, a study of their use of Instagram (Farinosi and Fortunati, 2020). This apparent gap in the literature provides an additional reason for examining the attitudes of bloggers from different demographics and in particular for including the views of older and of lapsed bloggers.

Some published research does specifically refer to the opinions of fashion bloggers themselves (Marwick, 2013; Williams and Hodges, 2016; Rocamora, 2018; Whitmer, 2020). This current study however seeks to build upon the existing literature but with a distinct focus on the particular views and reflections of fashion-blog authors in the areas of authenticity and credibility. It is also of particular value to review the attitudes of individuals who have discontinued blogging in order to identify the potential impact that sponsorship may have had in their decision to withdraw from this activity. Overall, relatively little research has been undertaken into understanding the thoughts, attitudes and motives of

individuals who have discontinued their blog activity. The inclusion of this group of former bloggers within the study therefore offers a unique element to this research.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of UK fashion bloggers concerning the impact of sponsored content upon the credibility and authenticity of their output. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to examine their reflection upon their wider experience as bloggers and their attitudes towards a range of aspects of their role, such as their interaction with sponsoring companies and readers. In addition, the study also considered the ways in which developments within the fashion blogosphere have affected the bloggers' own personal feelings and sense of satisfaction with their involvement in the sector, as well as identifying positive and negative issues that have emerged from their blogging experience.

The following objectives demonstrate how the research was planned and fulfilled:

• **Objective one:** to explore the evolution of the fashion blogosphere and critically evaluate the use of sponsorship and advertising within the sector.

• **Objective two:** to critically identify and analyse factors that relate to fashion blogger trust, credibility and authenticity.

• **Objective three:** to understand and critically analyse the impact that the inclusion of sponsored content may have had upon the perceptions and attitudes of fashion bloggers themselves with respect to their credibility and authenticity, and the wider impact of these changes in terms of the positive and negative consequences for their blogging practice and personal well-being.

• **Objective four:** to identify and critically evaluate any similarities and/or differences between the responses of the target blogger groups.

• **Objective five:** to understand and critically analyse the impact that the inclusion of sponsored content may have had upon the decision for inactive bloggers to suspend their online activity.

• **Objective six:** to critically evaluate how bloggers have developed and adapted their use of sponsored content within their posts in order to manage the potential impact of this material upon their credibility and authenticity.

Table 1.1 Chapter synopsis

Chapter 1: Introduction	This chapter has provided an introduction to the aim of the research thesis, justified the need for research into the chosen topic and introduced the study objectives.
Chapter 2: Literature Review	This chapter reviews the existing literature on the topic, with analysis and discussion on the development of blogs as an advertising channel and the effect sponsorship may have on blogger credibility and trust. The review focuses upon several themes including: the evolution of the blogosphere, the reasons and motivations underpinning blogging, the impact of sponsorship and advertising on blogs, and the effect of this on their credibility and trust.
Chapter 3: Philosophy and Methodology	This chapter discusses the research philosophy and methodology adopted in this study. It begins by discussing several research paradigms and approaches which are available to the researcher in this field. It then identifies and justifies the selected research methodology and method, suitable for an interpretative, qualitative research study of this kind.
Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis	This chapter analyses the primary data collected from the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The chapter presents the findings of the data and provides themes/conclusions that emerge from the data.
Chapter 5: Conclusion	This chapter discusses conclusions drawn from the data analysis and key contributions to knowledge, reflects upon the limitations of the research and offers recommendations for further study.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The areas of online advertising and blogs have been widely researched and this review of recent relevant literature highlights the key areas that are currently of particular academic interest, including: the historical background and evolution of the blogosphere, the reasons and motivations underpinning blogging, the impact of fashion blogs on traditional industry and journalism, the development of electronic word-of-mouth and impact of blogs on consumer purchasing behaviour, the development and impact of sponsorship and advertising on blogs, attitudes and responses to sponsorship, the avoidance of blog sponsorship, the introduction of blog sponsorship regulations, the growing area of blogger pressure, the area of source credibility, credibility of the blogger and advertisements on blogs, believability and trust, and the area of authenticity online.

2.1 The historical background to the study

Although an integral part of global online culture, blogs have a relatively short history. Over the last three decades, blogging platforms have become a popular and revolutionary aspect of the online landscape with their importance and influence recognised by social observers and commentators (Hautz *et al*, 2014). In fact, blogs, originally known as weblogs, first began to be popular online tools in the 1990s. Blood (2000), an early blogger and pioneer writer on the phenomenon, records that in 1998 there were only a handful of websites that we now typically refer to as blogs. Another early writer on the topic, Jesse James Garrett, began to identify and catalogue other blogs that were similar to his own, and by early 1999, had compiled a list of 23 blogs known to be in existence (Blood, 2000; Gil de Zuniga *et al*, 2011).

Within this list, it is generally accepted that one of the first recorded blogs was links.net created in 1994 by the freelance writer Justin Hall. At a time when search engines had yet to be fully developed, his webpages were among the first of their kind to demonstrate features and functions that quickly became common on blogging platforms, prompting the *New York Times* in 2004 to title Hall 'the founding father of personal bloggers' (Pihl, 2013b; Luvaas, 2013). As the name

suggests, links.net was essentially a collection of links to what was new and interesting on the web and Hall referred to it as his 'personal homepage' as the term 'blog' had not yet emerged in modern culture. Hall became something of a media phenomenon due to the range of inputs on his personal homepage where he shared diary entries, his thoughts on the future of media, and his comments on the potential of the internet (Park and Kim, 2014). The several thousand pages in Hall's links.net archive not only record his personal life story but also map the internet's rapid expansion in the period, and they illustrate the development of the specific from of online journalism that came to be known as internet blogging.

The actual term 'weblog' was first coined in 1997 by another influential early contributor, Jorn Barger, on his Robot Wisdom website (Bernoff, 2009; Morrison, 2013). Barger used the phrase to describe the process of 'logging the web' when browsing online. Two years later in 1999, 'weblog' was shortened to simply 'blog' by Peter Merholz, a programmer who transformed the word 'weblog' into the phrase 'we blog' in the sidebar of his own website, peterme.com (Ayto and Simpson, 2010). The word was quickly popularised and was chosen as the top new word of 2004 by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Lu, Fan and Zhou, 2016). The terms 'blog', 'weblog' and 'web log' are often used interchangeably and 'blog' itself has been used as both a noun and a verb. The term 'blogger' was soon adopted to describe the weblog editor/ author (Blood, 2000).

A fuller definition of the word blog was given by Wright (2006:46) who described it in terms of its technical structure as 'a web page that contains regularly posted inlays that are archived and arranged in reverse chronological order' (Blood, 2004; Morrison, 2013). In 2014, the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*'s emphasised instead the personal aspect at the core of blogging activity: 'an internet website containing an eclectic and frequently updated assortment of items of interest to its author'. Mutum and Wang (2010:31) also acknowledged the interactive and cross-media nature of blogs when defining them as 'interactive websites with posts that are updated frequently and may contain links, images, videos or music clips, of interest to its author or authors that are archived and arranged in reverse chronological order'. As blogging developed, the term 'blogosphere' also gained popular currency as a term to describe its worldwide adoption as a form of online expression and communication. Brad. L. Graham was probably the first to use this

term in 1999 but it was certainly popularised by Quick (2002:1) who wrote 'I propose a name for the intellectual cyberspace we bloggers occupy: the Blogosphere'.

Many of the early blogs that appeared in the blogosphere were described as 'filter-type' web pages, which would be curated by the blogger. These early blogs offered commentary and opinions which allowed for discussions and debates with readers and other bloggers online. The main focus of these early blogs tended to be heavily reliant on links to and from other websites. In comparison, a newer version of blogs that began to emerge in the early 2000s were more diary-like in format and were commonly referred to as 'journal' blogs (Wiażewicz and Zatwarnicka-Madura, 2016). These types of blogs tended to offer more personal commentary, with 'journal' bloggers sharing more about the events in their own life. This was in contrast to the 'filter-type' blogs which tended to focus on more external events and news, rather than personal blogger updates (Adamic and Glance, 2005; Mutum, 2011).

During the first decade of the century, the term blog became established in the public consciousness as a word that described an online personal journal or diary. Most effective blogs tended to be regularly updated websites, typically run by a motivated individual or small group with shared interests (Amazeen and Wojdynski, 2018). From the outset, most blogs have tended to be written in an informal or conversational style, which helps explain their popularity with general consumers (Ekdale *et al*, 2010). The popularity and up-take of blogging platforms is clear. Whilst only 23 blog-like websites were recognised in 1997, with the introduction of easy-to-use blogging software the blogosphere grew quickly. By 2008, the blog-tracking directory and search engine, Technorati, claimed that it had indexed 133 million blogs since 2002 (Pedersen, 2010; Morrison, 2013). As of June 2020, there are estimated to be between 500-600 million registered blogs on popular hosting sites such as Blogger, WordPress and Tumblr (Petrov, 2020). The global figure may in fact be larger considering given that some blog hosting services do not reveal user data. It is also important to consider that not all of these blogs continue to be frequently updated and an unknown proportion will in fact have been abandoned and discontinued.

Nevertheless, the arrival of the journal blog changed the nature of blogging, and the term blog often continues to be seen in terms of its core form of an online personal journal (McNeill, 2005). Maintaining a blog-like-diary provides the author with a great deal of freedom for personal expression in terms of choice of content and selection of tone and attitude (Esposito *et al*, 2015). As a result of this freedom, blogs are an ideal medium for providing insight into the personal characteristics of blog authors, their interests and their personalities. Personal blogging has become a worldwide phenomenon in large part due to the user-friendly interface provided by contemporary blogging software (Kemp, 2017; Sudha and Sheena, 2017).

2.2 History of fashion blogs

Fashion blogs tend to include daily updates on fashion trends, clothing and accessories, news from the industry about products and events, celebrity fashion choices, street fashion trends, and most commonly, the life of the fashion blogger documenting their own interests in, and attitudes towards, style and clothing (Chua and Chang, 2016). Fashion blogs can therefore cover aspects of the fashion industry at all levels from the largest international fashion houses to the smallest independent designers. Increasingly, many fashion blogs can also be categorised as shopping blogs whose content is similar to that of traditional fashion magazines. As a result, many fashion retailers have also started blogs to promote their products. Fashion blogs tend to focus on consumer fashion advice, featuring how-to articles for the reader. Typically, articles may discuss clothing fit, the matching and complementing of colours and other information on clothes wearing and care, along with advice on recent trends and future products (Kim *et al*, 2020).

Fashion blogs first appeared in the blogosphere circa 2002. However, it was not until approximately 2006 that fashion blogging experienced significant growth in terms of popularity and prominence on the web (Kottke, 2013; Mora and Rocamora, 2015). Initially a small-scale phenomenon best characterised by the phrase 'hobby blogging', most of the original fashion blogs were creative outlets for individual amateur enthusiasts to share their love for fashion, advice, recommendations, opinions and values concerning aspects of fashion products and

the practices of the fashion industry. In this early stage, creating and maintaining a fashion blog was very much seen as an unpaid hobby activity (Kulmala, Mesiranta and Tuominen, 2013) and almost all fashion blogging could be said to have a communitarian character, with bloggers building links online and sharing interests with other enthusiasts (Esposito *et al*, 2015).

Ownership of these early blogs was generally under the control of interested individuals willing to share their enthusiasm for fashion. In 2004, Patricia Handschiegel founded 'stylediary.net' which is widely considered to be one of the first personal fashion style blogs. This was followed by a string of equally successful early fashion bloggers including: Susie Lau of 'Style Bubble', Tavi Gevinson of 'Style Rookie', Jane Aldridge of 'Sea of Shoes', Chiara Ferragni of 'The Blonde Salad', Bryan Yambao of 'BryanBoy', Rumi Neely of 'Fashion Toast' and Scott Schuman of 'The Sartorialist', to name a few. These pioneers of fashion blogging paved the way for thousands of others and have gone on to forge lucrative careers within the fashion industry. In effect, they were soon adopted and arguably neutralised by commercial interests which quickly learned how to incorporate blogging within their own stable of publishing activities, turning a potentially critical threat into a lucrative opportunity (Zain, Perry and Quinn, 2018).

When reviewing the literature surrounding the history of fashion blogging, it is generally accepted that there have been two distinct waves in the development of the field as outlined below (Findlay, 2015; Mora and Rocamora, 2015; Hagan, 2020). Whilst these researchers argue that there is not a formal code for blogging, they do note the particular shifts that took place within the fashion blogosphere as it professionalised. They argue that in each wave there have been distinct elements that have become characteristic of the current blogging practice (Findlay, 2014; Pedroni, Sadaba and San Miguel, 2017). The recognised second wave is particularly relevant to this study, as it relates to the evident shift within the fashion blogosphere towards a more commercialised form and approach.

2.2.1 First wave of fashion blogging

In this initial, original wave of blogging, many fashion bloggers tended to take photographs of their outfits in locations close to home including bedrooms, living rooms and gardens. It was normal for bloggers to use basic equipment such as a tripod and camera timer to take pictures and ask family members and friends to help (Pham, 2011; Duffy, 2013; Whitmer, 2020). It is clear through archive photos that the majority of these first-wave fashion bloggers focused on creating outfits that were affordable, often sourcing items from both high-street stores and charity shops, and thus as Findlay (2015:167) states 'engaging in a kind of fashion bricolage'. This is also noticed by Marion and Nairn (2011:31) who also describe first-wave bloggers as 'making do with whatever was available whether perfect or imperfect, cheap or expensive, simple or elaborate' in order to create outfits to post on their blog.

A common characteristic of early style blogs was the principle that bloggers were heavily inspired by a specific idea, fashion collection, catwalk look or editorial, attempting to make a do-it-yourself interpretation of the piece through clothes they could afford or put together with existing items in their wardrobe (Mortara and Roberti, 2017). Similarly, a number of studies note that in early blogging, outfit posts were used to catalogue the blogger's daily outfits, as opposed to showcasing clothes specifically worn for a styled photoshoot for the blog, a practice that has become more common in second-wave blogging. It is clear, however, that in this initial stage most early bloggers preferred an amateur, homemade approach to outfits and photography, which many studies argue contributed to the popularity and relevance of many fashion blogs, as compared to advertising in the contemporary mass media (Allen, 2009; Pham, 2011; Rocamora, 2012).

Figure 2.1: example of first wave fashion blogging (Source, Author, 2020). Clockwise left to right: Zoe Sugg (Zoella), Victoria McGrath (In The Frow), Tavi Gevinson (Style Rookie) and Susie Lau (Style Bubble).

Figure 2.1 above illustrates a number of examples of first-wave fashion blogging. The pictures were sourced from each individual's blog and illustrate some of the characteristics of first-wave blogging: pictures taken in the comfort of their own home; the blogger's attempt to recreate a specific 'high-fashion' look; bloggers wearing realistic outfits that were worn the same day. Findlay (2015) and Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie (2017) describe these types of early bloggers as outsiders looking in, and not necessarily motivated by the desire to be 'included'. The visual atmosphere of much early fashion blogging is characterised by an amateur, hobbyist approach that expresses the fun and experimental enthusiasm of this initial period. These pioneers of fashion blogging were starting their own private conversations about fashion and interpreting style and trends in their own highly individualistic way. The textual interaction between blogger and reader was almost one of equals sharing thoughts and opinions amongst friends rather than between 'superstar and fan'. This was in contrast to much of the practice found in

traditional fashion commentary which focused upon a well-established formula of seasonal designs, consumer trends and investment pieces (Esteban-Santos *et al*, 2018).

2.2.2 Second wave of fashion blogging

Many studies argue and suggest that there was a distinct shift within the fashion blog sector which was characterised by a second wave of more professional, commercially focused fashion bloggers (Marwick, 2013; Fortunati and Farinosi, 2014; Esposito *et al*, 2015; Findlay, 2015; Rocamora, 2018). Some argue that, as early as 2008-2010, there were already growing signs of commercialization within the field, and that bloggers were increasingly being offered opportunities within the fashion industry, especially by niche companies and magazines. In 2009 for example, Susie Lau was offered a contributing editor position for *Dazed and Confused* digital magazine, as a result of the quality of her blog. Other fashion bloggers were being invited to sit front row at the major fashion shows alongside journalists and editors from leading fashion magazines and share their experience both on their blog but also through established magazines e.g. Tavi Gevinson blogged about haute couture shows in Paris for the niche publication, *POP* (Khamis and Munt, 2010; Motta and Biagini, 2017; Whitmer, 2020).

During this time, many bloggers also began to be offered lucrative opportunities to collaborate with established fashion brands, predominately by creating their own line of products to promote to blog readers/ consumers. One of the first examples of this was in 2009, when Jane Aldridge of the style blog, Sea of Shoes, collaborated with major fashion retailer Urban Outfitters to create a footwear collection (Aldridge, 2009) which was then advertised in the sidebar of her blog and also on the company's website. These examples help to illustrate the commercial opportunities that were being made available to early bloggers, as fashion companies recognised the potential of fashion blogs as a useful platform for reaching and influencing target consumer purchasing decisions (Al-Saleh, 2017).

Figure 2.2 example of popular bloggers promoting branded products. Clockwise from left to right: Jane Aldridge from 'Sea of Shoes' promoting her shoe collection with fashion retailer, Urban Outfitters, Victoria McGrath from 'In The Frow' promoting her own book, The New Fashion Rules, Chiara Ferragni from 'The Blonde Salad' promoting Oreo biscuits and clothing, Zoe Sugg from 'Zoella' promoting her own line of beauty products.

Nevertheless, many studies argue that the terms 'first wave' and 'second wave' are to some extent misleading and present changes in the blogosphere in an over-rigidly defined manner. These studies suggest that the shift from first to second wave happened gradually and that not all bloggers developed out of the ethos of the first wave while others adopted second-wave characteristics very quickly. Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie (2017) and Hall (2017) in particular noted that newer entrants to the blogosphere were more interested in the opportunities to generate income from their blogging. Meder (2011:1) notes how bloggers synonymous with first-wave characteristics such as Tavi Gevinson, 'represent the end of an era where it was still possible to start a blog without ulterior motivations'. Thus, in contrast to the typical first-wave DIY outfits and photoshoots taken at home, the blog output of typical second-wave bloggers bear a much stronger resemblance in terms of content, style and technical presentation to the traditional magazines that they were in the process of supplanting.

Due to the potentially lucrative ties with commercial fashion companies, many second-wave bloggers have styled their clothes in ways that more clearly resembled established patterns of advertising used by their sponsoring partner. It can be difficult for readers to discern whether the advertised product has in fact been selected by the blogger herself and is an outfit that she genuinely personally owns, likes and is happy to wear regularly (Orton-Johnson, 2017). Similarly, bloggers with commercial links do not always disclose if items have been gifted by a company purely for a specific fashion shoot. Yet, some observers have pointed out that second-wave bloggers cannot be characterised as solely interested in monetary opportunities and free products, and that the bulk of them are in fact in a cross-over situation, happy to receive rewards but still essentially viewing themselves as honest, independent bloggers (Esteban-Santos *et al*, 2018).

However, the original structure of blogging remains largely in place: blogs are still almost always organised around key features such as sharing elements of one's personal life and narrative, sharing thoughts and advice on fashion and style, expressing a sense of fun and interest in fashion developments. The key element that has changed since approximately 2008 has been a much greater awareness amongst bloggers of the commercial opportunities available and the relative ease in which blog content can be monetised (Esposito *et al*, 2015). Findlay (2015) argues that first-wave blogging can be characterised by the term independence, whereas second-wave blog activity is best characterised by the term aspiration. When discussing second-wave blogging, Meder (2011:1) describes its development as a 'gold rush moment', while Findlay (2015) notes that, from the beginning, some bloggers 'weren't necessarily as enchanted with the format as a creative medium, than as one that seemed like an easy route to attention and cash' *(*Findlay, 2015). Others argue that the distinction between the separate phases of the blogging movement mostly stem from the desire of new and younger bloggers to be seen as aspirational figures with an individual and exclusive sense of fashion-ability, an outcome far removed from the original ideals of early bloggers (Esteban-Santos *et al*, 2018).

In order to retain their attraction for commercial companies, these newer individualistic fashion bloggers had to find ways to continually entice and retain a

growing number of followers. The most successful of them have tended to pay much greater attention to the visual photographic impact of their posts and, as a result, have resorted to highly professional presentational strategies. They have tended to be alert to new trends in social activism that relate to fashion, to fashion publishing, design and podcasting. Although they have professionalised their product, these 'top bloggers' would continue to claim that they remain independent from the in-house control that fashion companies had traditionally exerted over their choice of products, their advertising and the intentions of their consumers (Fischer, 2017).

2.2.3 The overall impact of blogs on the fashion industry

The rise of fashion blogging is one of the most disruptive innovations to affect the management and structure of the fashion industry in recent decades. As indicated above, a handful of fashion enthusiasts across the world began to publish online diaries featuring candid clothing reviews, emotive style musings and naïve DIY fashion shoots. Their arrival was especially encouraged by the combination of easy online publishing, inexpensive digital photography and the digitization of fashion industry advertising. The best-managed of these early blogs in terms of meticulous presentation and regular update swiftly built up significant followings of viewers and fans. As Marwick (2013:1) suggests, fashion blogging opened up spaces for 'democratic engagement' with clothing and fashion in a way that was antithetical to the previous practices of a more rigorously patrolled fashion world.

As a result, fashion blogging has become a highly profitable media channel, with both independent bloggers and commercially funded blog networks competing for their share of attention on the blogosphere (Singh, Veron-Jackson and Cullinane, 2008; Zain, Perry and Quinn, 2018). A large number of successful bloggers have developed a significant web presence, become internet celebrities in their own right, gained substantial incomes from sponsorship, and exerted considerable influence over their readers (Crewe, 2013; Dekavalla, 2020). The rise to prominence of these celebrity bloggers is fundamentally interconnected with the concurrent advances in marketing technology and wider societal changes, including the rise of fast-fashion retailers such as Primark and ASOS, and a relative

decline in disposable income after the economic difficulties of 2008 (McCormick and Livett, 2012). These developments have encouraged the fashion industry to become more accessible to all: consumers have greater, faster access to a wider range of cheaper goods, are able to exchange brand experiences with one another, and can purchase more freely on the internet (Dumont and Ots, 2020).

The fashion industry still relies heavily on traditional media and advertising to communicate with, and influence, its consumers, but companies have had to respond to online developments, even though these threaten to encourage social and marketing trends out-with their control (Kreis and Mafael, 2014). Fashion blogs, in particular, represent a potentially disruptive innovation to the existing social dynamics of fashion consumption and mass media in modern consumer society (Hsu, Lin and Chiang, 2013). As far as the fashion industry was concerned, the emergence of this democratising movement initially threatened to pull the rug from under their feet. As if from nowhere, hugely influential but independent blogging behemoths had appeared, selectively publicising and critiquing fashion products, free from the constraints of traditional advertising-funded journalism. Throughout the fashion industry, blogs and social media opened up a once-elitist top-down market sector, making the creation and distribution of opinion more accessible and relevant to everyday consumers (Lee and Koo, 2012).

In the early years of fashion bloggers, academics state that there was very little connection between the fashion media industry and fashion bloggers (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019; Whitmer, 2020). Blogs were often considered by dominant figures in the print-based advertising sector as a seemingly insignificant entity, which the influential American publicist, Kelly Cutrone, likened to the '*Wild West'*. Early fashion bloggers were not considered to be legitimate communicators with a relevant point of view, and they attracted characteristics such as 'pesky' and 'lowly' from industry professionals who derided their amateur origins (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019). As such, many fashion bloggers were seen as 'industry outsiders': they did not typically have journalism degrees, nor were they former industry professionals entering the digital domain. As Marwick (2015) and Findlay (2015) state, many were simply amateur fans with a keen interest in fashion, and a desire to share it, both visually and through written content.

Nevertheless, the ever-increasing ability of fashion bloggers to reach their target audience and influence its attitudes, perceptions and purchasing behaviour quickly made them a powerful marketing tool and an important channel for fashion retail companies in search of potential new customers (Mutum, 2011). Companies were soon aware that contemporary consumers tended to place more trust in the opinions of bloggers who appeared to be similar to themselves, than in conventional forms of advertising. Marketers increasingly appreciated that blogs play an influential role in the processing of advertisement messages, creating consumer conversations and shaping purchase intentions (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Lu, Fang and Zhou, 2016; Yu and Kim, 2020).

In response to this challenge, companies have increasingly collaborated with influential fashion bloggers who can demonstrate their ability to share their brand experiences on a regular basis with a solid following of readers/consumers (Halvorsen *et al*, 2013; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Reichelt, Sievert and Jacob (2014) examined bloggers with high levels of influence over their readers and identified three main characteristics that distinguished them from other, less successful bloggers: expertise, authority and authenticity. To some extent these factors were integrated and dependent upon one another, a point recognised by companies who increasingly appreciated that consumers were now relying upon fashion bloggers for help with purchasing decisions (Uzunoglu and Kip, 2014). Blogs have therefore enabled a new model of consumer collaboration and consumer-generated advertising which has created alternative commercial pathways for businesses towards their target consumers. Many companies now allocate substantial annual budgets for blogger activities in their marketing communication plans (Shiau, 2014; Park and Kim, 2014). For example, the 2020 annual report of the American Marketing Association examined Linqia, a leading influencer marketing company much involved in the general blogosphere. The AMA's annual report surveyed 192 blog-based marketers considered to be sufficiently important to be given the title of 'influencer' in sectors such as fast-moving consumer goods which includes fashion, food and beverages, media and retail. They found that 40% of these marketers ran six or more blogger campaigns in 2019, and 57% of these marketers indicated that they were planning to increase their influencer marketing budgets in 2020. The extent to which these marketers are committed to the blog advertising is indicated by the fact that approximately 25% of those

surveyed were planning to spend over 40% of their marketing budget on influencer marketing alone (Zeng, 2020). Overall, many studies agree that the phenomenon of fashion blogging has greatly contributed to the modern narrative of the fashion industry and has ultimately encouraged the emergence of what Fortunati, Farinosi and Nei, (2017:155) define as 'the grassroots of fashion storytelling'.

2.3 Motivation to blog

The impact of aspects of commercialisation upon the motivation of bloggers is of relevance to the present study, and a body of literature on this theme is available from the earliest days of the blogosphere onwards. It can be argued that, in the earliest years of blogging, the activity was initially only available to users who had access to quite specific technical computer skills (Blood, 2002; Li, 2005). However, through the adoption of affordable, user-friendly technology and free blogging platforms such as Pitas and Blogger (Blood, 2000), it quickly became an activity that was accessible to anyone with an internet connection. This resulted in the creation and rapid evolution of the blogosphere.

Early researchers (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Ekdale *et al*, 2010) established a number of key factors that motivated those who were amongst the first blog practitioners. These included a passion for their area of interest, social connection with fellow 'enthusiasts', a sense that participating in blogging offered both entertainment and a potential enhancement of their social position, an eagerness to improve their digital online skills, and an opportunity to participate in information gathering for specific needs. Huang *et al* (2007) identified a slightly different set of additional motivations for blogging: the need to express oneself, a desire to document daily life, to participate in community forums, to provide commentary of relevant news and events, and to seek information. Huang *et al* (2007) also argued that 'information creation' and 'social interaction' were two main behavioural drivers for blogging, an early finding that was also supported by Kaye (2005) and McKenna and Pole (2008).

Huang *et al* (2007) also proposed a research model that illustrated the inter-relationships between blogging motivation and behaviour. The model identified

two blogging behaviours: 'interaction-oriented' and 'information-oriented'. Interaction-oriented behaviour was associated with self-expression, life-documenting and establishing social links by sharing comments on other blogs. Information-orientated behaviour was exemplified by information searching, participation in content-based forums and knowledge extraction from other blogs.

Nardi *et al* (2004) proposed a model for categorising blogs according to purpose, which outlined the five following basic functions: documenting the blog author's life, providing commentary and opinion of interest to the author, expressing deeply felt emotions and feelings, expressing ideas and thoughts through the medium of writing, and forming and maintaining online communities, forums or discussion feeds. In the same period of blogosphere development, Schiano *et al* (2004), identified the following motivations, particularly as regards the up-take of journal-style blogging: the creation of a diary or similar means of personal record keeping; the development of an online newsletter as a way of sharing pictures and notable events; documenting travel and holiday logs; recording work tasks and achievements. As early as 2002, Papacharissi researched and evaluated the motivations to create personal home pages or proto-blogs. She identified six main motivations: self-expression, entertainment, sharing information, communication with online friends and family, personal hobby and professional advancement. This pattern was essentially confirmed by Nardi *et al* (2004) and Schiano *et al* (2004) who agreed that bloggers seemed to be primarily motivated by a desire for social interaction and personal expression.

Later researchers of blogging motivations were also interested in identifying the reasons for the spectacular growth of the blogosphere. Lenhart and Fox (2006) and then Chen (2015) both found that creative expression, documentation of personal experiences and meeting new people with similar interests were strong motivators. In addition to knowledge sharing and the satisfaction of belonging to a community with mutual interests and values, Hsu and Lin (2008) and Mutum (2011) also stressed the ease of adopting and using improved technology as an important motivator.

Although much of the earlier research focused upon online motivation, several early academics were also interested in understanding and documenting the socio-demographics of bloggers (Herring *et al*, 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005;

Nowson and Oberlander, 2006; Schmidt, 2007). These studies found that the majority of blogs in that period were of the personal journal type, with bloggers coming together online to share personal experiences and reflections. Although the title of journal blog suggests a solitary personal diary, the types of blog platform facilitated a wide degree of interaction with other bloggers and readers, ultimately enabling the creation and development of online communities with shared interests and similar subcultural identification. Also interested in the social value of blogs, Gumbrecht (2004) examined their use in comparison to other forms of online communication such as forums and communities. Her research found that blogs offered a more dynamic approach to content as they could be updated more regularly, and they could offer the opportunity for two-way and group dialogue e.g. other bloggers and readers can leave direct comments on blog posts. Blogs have also been found to encourage interpersonal communication to a greater extent than other platforms as they can give the blog author more control over content and communicative setting, which can in turn provide a 'protected space' for blogger self-presentation and communication (Orton-Johnson, 2017; Whitmer, 2020).

2.3.1 Changes in blogger motivations: blogging as a career

Much of this earlier research tended to be interested in the reasons for the rise of the blogging phenomenon, and described the main motivations for an individual to blog and for readers to engage with a blog, with many of the factors mentioned generally linked to essentially personal, social and/or communitarian motives. In contrast, more recent research suggests that the motivation to blog has developed over time, with academics confirming that the potential commercial rewards from blogging have become a stronger and more common motivating force. Fullwood *et al* (2015) and Hall (2017) both found that newer entrants to the blogosphere had often become involved in blogging principally because it was perceived as a potentially lucrative activity. Some researchers have viewed this commercialisation of the blogosphere as a positive movement in some respects: Marwick (2014), Keinan *et al* (2015) and Jablonska and Sniegula (2017) have argued that the development of blogs from amateur meeting-place into a

marketing communication tool has been of value to consumers and has helped to democratise the online marketplace. However, Manikonda *et al* (2015) and Mutum *et al* (2018) believe that blog commercialisation has weakened the original credibility and authentic values that initially sparked the growth and popularity of the blogosphere.

The commercialisation of many blogs has resulted in some interesting social impacts. As early as 2008, advertising platform Technorati reported that a majority of bloggers surveyed (54 percent) already featured advertising on their blogs (Chiu and Ho, 2009; Eagleman, 2013; Hu, 2015). Pedroni (2015) and Evans *et al* (2017) argue that, for new commercial bloggers, motivation has shifted from socialising online and sharing personal opinion, to creating blog content that is catering for an online audience. Mutum *et al* (2018) and Ramirez (2018) both confirm that, for many bloggers, the opportunity to make money online has become a much stronger motivating force to blog, even though it was initially the social-networking elements that attracted them. This is further noted by Callahan *et al* (2018) and McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) who also found that the economic motivation for blogging has become a stronger force when compared to personal and social motivations.

Table 2.1 List of motivation to blog: collection of some key authors and the identified motivations to blog over time.

Author	Motivations to Blog
Papacharissi (2002), Li (2005).	Sharing information, entertainment, self-expression, communication with friends and family, passing time, professional advancement. Bloggers are motivated to write blogs to keep track of and to document their life. The study also found that blogging is used to improve, refine and practice their writing. Users are motivated to write blogs to provide and share interesting information with others. Bloggers tend to blog in order to fulfil entertainment needs, for fun and to simply do what they love.

	Through blogging, users can fulfil their need to socialise, connect with family and friends, and meet new people.
Nardi *et al* (2004), Zhu and Tan (2007), Ekdale *et al (*2010).	Documenting the author's life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions, working out ideas through writing, forming and maintaining communities or forums.
Schiano *et al* (2004), Hsu and Lin (2008), Chen (2015).	Identified knowledge sharing, communication and social factors such as community identification and status.
Herring *et al*, (2005), Nowson and Oberlander (2006), Schmidt, (2007).	Sharing personal experiences and reflections.
Lenhart and Fox (2006).	Sharing stories and expressing creativity.
Herring *et al (*2005).	Expressing personal experiences and thoughts.
Kaye (2005), McKenna and Pole (2008).	To seek information, to provide commentary, to participate in community forums, to document daily life, to express oneself.
Detenber, Wijaya and Goh (2008).	Motivated to blog for need for affiliation and self-disclosure.
Ibrahim (2008).	Blog can act as an archive and help in keeping a record of important personal events and memories.
Hsu and Lin (2008), Rahman (2017).	Bloggers can be motivated to blog in order to give knowledge and enjoy helping others. Motivation can also related to altruism behaviours such as to educate, inspire and help others. Motivated to blog in order to refine certain skills, such as writing and photography. Social motivation, which is the desire to stay connected to and retain relationship with people who share the same interests. They also maintained a blog because they wanted to connect with the public and maintain a relationship with their readers.
Park and Lee (2009).	Bloggers can be motivated by the need to socialise and establish self-status, and to seek out entertainment and information.

Fullwood *et al* (2015).	Motivated to blog for personal revelation, emotional outlet, creative outlet, selective disclosure, social networking and advertising.
Chen (2015).	Motivated to blog for information seeking and recreational reasons. Users also motivated to blog due to engagement with their audience.
Callahan *et al* (2018).	Motivated to blog as a way to serve personal growth, rather than as a means to connect with others or establish online relationships. Journal style writing can provide a way for users to capture and preserve life moments that may be of future value to themselves and their blog readers. Blogging can also provide a way to reflect and learn from personal experiences causing improved self-awareness and understanding. Users can be motivated by the social aspect of blogging e.g. the ability to stay connected and share knowledge and experiences with friends and followers. Motivated to blog in order to inspire others online.
Chiu and Ho (2009), Eagleman (2013), Pedroni (2015), Abidin (2017), Evans *et al (*2017), Hall (2017), Mutum *et al* (2018), Ramirez (2018), Callahan *et al* (2018), McFarlane and Samsioe (2020).	Motivated by potential lucrative opportunities including monetary rewards. Also motivated by the opportunity to be featured in fashion magazines, receive monetary benefits, sponsorship and advertising opportunities, be recognised figure within mainstream fashion industry. Motivated to use blog as a marketing tool. Motivated to pursue blogging as a potential career route e.g. gain full time employment from blogging activities.

2.4 Blog readers

Nardi *et al* (2004:224) observed that 'blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog', and an abundance of blogging research within the academic literature focuses on the perceptions, motivations and interactivity of blog users usually known as readers.

A significant characteristic of blogs is the interactivity that can take place between the blogger and the blog reader, e.g. individuals who read the blogs, comment and leave feedback and continue the conversation on their own blogs, and between the blog users themselves (Mutum, 2011). Findlay (2015) and Whitmer (2020) found that readers who enjoyed following blogs were often inspired to start their own, therefore helping contribute to the growth of the fashion blogosphere.

A large number of the diary/ journal blogs examined during the early stages of the blogosphere did not tend to demonstrate high levels of interactivity. Many of these blogs would have a small, regular circle of readers who might leave feedback and comments. Nardi *et al* (2004) found that some blogs could facilitate in-person social contact, for example if the blogger was travelling and/or attending blog-related events. These researchers also noted that, although there were some blogs classed as A-List that could attract hundreds of reader comments per day, the majority of blogs tended to only be read by a few close friends, and many bloggers would interact with 'regulars' who they knew would be reading their posts (Pedersen, 2010; Lövheim, 2013). As the blogosphere globalised however, academics increasingly began to investigate the wider reasons why individuals were attracted to read, use and interact with blogs in ever larger numbers (Dumont and Ots, 2020).

A number of researchers were particularly interested in examining blog reader motivation and participation. For example, early studies found that, as with traditional media such as television and magazines, individuals tended to use the internet mainly for entertainment and/or surveillance purposes (Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Kaye (2005) also identified six specific motivations for accessing blogs [with particular focus on political blogs], namely: information seeking and media checking, convenience, personal

fulfilment, political surveillance, social surveillance, and expression and affiliation (Detenber, Wijaya and Goh, 2008; Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019). Similarly, Blood (2002) and Hamilton (2003) found that, due to their ease of use and convenience, readers seeking information online were quick to adopt blogs, as they could be perceived as offering more up-to-date news quicker than traditional media. The researchers note how blog readers will actively search for information on blogs, and at the same time, compare this information with the traditional media. Blogs could also offer readers varying viewpoints, arguments and opinions on issues and events that might not be available elsewhere, therefore making political and social surveillance a strong motivator (Lövheim, 2013). Adding to this, Rahman (2017) found that blog readers continue to seek out and appreciate varied opinions on societal topics, enjoying the opportunity that blogging allows them to express their opinions and affiliate with like-minded individuals, rather than traditional media (Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020).

Another frequent blog-reader motivation highlighted within the literature is that of personal fulfilment and the sense of community that blog readers can experience online. Numerous studies argue that blog readers who regularly interact with blogs can experience high levels of personal fulfilment, with blog discussions fulfilling numerous emotional needs such as entertainment, relaxation, excitement and involvement (Hänninen, 2016; Chen and Behm-Morawitz, 2018). Even if a reader does not comment on a blog, Gil De Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas (2009) and Rossi (2016) found that merely reading blog posts can help readers to feel a sense of belonging online as a part of a wider blogging community, where both blogger and reader are 'in-the-know' and kept up to date on the latest fashion trends and issues (Kenix, 2009; Jones, 2017). Hsu and Lin (2008) also noted this sense of community had a more altruistic purpose: blog readers could be highly motivated to engage and comment on blogs, as they enjoy interacting with others, but particularly enjoy contributing knowledge that may be helpful and of use to others (Dumont and Ots, 2020).

Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2008: 1113) also found that blog readers tend to engage with blogs in a habitual manner, for example reading them as part of their morning routine such as checking their email. The researchers also note how readers will read blogs as a form of escapism i.e. as a form of 'brain candy'. Adding

to this idea of reading for escapism, the researchers also go on to argue that some blogs create an experience for their readers that is similar to that of traditional fashion magazines, a finding that is confirmed by more recent studies (Ferreira and Vasconcelos, 2017; Lee *et al*, 2017; Mole, 2019). Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2008) also found that community belonging is an essential component in a successful relationship between blogger and reader, as blog readers want to feel 'part of it', a finding also noted by Abidin (2013) and Sadaba and San Miguel (2016). Through conversational style communication and the ability to engage and comment, bloggers are able to create a strong bond with their readers. Wang, Xiang and Fesenmaier (2014: 18) found that readers who access their favourite blogs via smart phone can also experience even stronger connections: it can be like 'having a friend with you at all times'.

Armstrong and McAdams (2010) and Hu (2015) also discovered that users who regularly read blogs could demonstrate a higher evidence of experience and expertise when evaluating blog content, and that this level of expertise could differ from that of non-blog users. Their study went on to identify frequency of blog usage as a variable in determining the credibility of blog content: frequent blog users were more experienced in evaluating blog-content credibility than less frequent users (Armstrong and McAdams, 2011).

Therefore, after reviewing perceptions of blog readers, it is clear that the conversational nature and interactivity of blogs can make them effective platforms for building and maintaining online relationships between bloggers and their readers (Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson, 2008; Magno, 2017). Online media, particularly blogs, have reshaped the traditional flow of information between the public and professional media. Armstrong and McAdams (2011) argue that the traditional flow of mass communication, where opinion leaders serve as an intermediary between the media and public (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), has been replaced by what Reuters former CEO Thomas Glocer called the 'two-way pipe'. Glocer (2006) suggested that the media can no longer dictate which information consumers obtain. Digital platforms such as blogs have allowed the public to read, publish and disseminate material, and comment upon it, on a much larger scale that ever before (Sudha and Sheena, 2017; Nash, 2019).

2.5 Blogging and fashion journalism

Through this, we have seen the increasing development of a kind of 'citizen journalism' where individuals with little or no journalism training are able to produce content for a mass audience online via a blog. Bloggers have increasingly been viewed as information providers, alongside, or in fact in lieu of, traditional fashion magazines (Kaiser, 2017; Panchal and Cassidy, 2018). Although much of the content found on the web may not meet traditional journalists' criteria for 'reliable journalism', the content nevertheless becomes part of a consumer's diet of information and can influence his/her behaviour (Zain, Perry and Quinn, 2018; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).

Many early academics studied the emergence of blogs and the disruption that they may have on other forms of media. For example, Levy (2002) and Palser (2002) referred to blogs as a new form of journalism, and Kaye (2005:75) recognised a journalistic function in blogging, describing them as 'watchdogs that keep big media honest'. Blood (2002) refers to blogs as online opinion pages while other researchers have described them as 'text versions of talk radio' and havens for those seeking shelter from potentially biased mass media (Kaye, 2005). Seipp (2002) agrees and believes that the increased dependence upon blogs as a source of information may also be attributed to a general distrust and dislike of traditional media felt by readers.

Rosenberg (2009:1) argues that, initially, bloggers and their blog readers could be particularly critical of journalists, whilst journalists could be critical of bloggers, considering them, 'wannabe amateurs badly in need of some skills and editors'. Nevertheless, although both sides were critical of each other, some academics argued that they began to rely upon one another. Kurtz (2002) noted how bloggers relied on traditional media for their online content and, by linking to media articles, can help to boost a blog's authority. On the other hand, journalists tend to follow and keep an eye on popular blogs in order to understand and stay at the forefront of public opinion (Panchal and Cassidy, 2018).

Tremayne (2007) initially argued that many bloggers lack the basic traits historically associated with journalism, such as focusing on a specific topic area or

beat, reporting with objectivity and impartiality, and double-checking information. Andrews (2003), however, argues that bloggers can take on a different role: one of observation, analysis and interpretation. McKenna and Pole (2008) also noted the effect that blogging could have on mainstream media, such as scrutinising their reporting and keeping stories alive until large news organizations paid more attention. When examining the journalistic role of bloggers, Lasica (2003: 71) described them as 'individuals playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, sorting, analysing and disseminating news and information – a task once reserved almost exclusively to the news media'. Blood (2003) argues that it is the actual, regular practice of journalism, not merely one's employment by a news source, that determines who is actually a journalist, and that blogging should be seen as part of a new, larger news ecology which includes pieces of journalism generated online by independent individuals.

When examining the specific impact of blogs on fashion journalism in particular, Carlson (2015) notes that a contrast is often made between traditional fashion journalism, which tends to be seen as informed and therefore authoritative, and blogging, which can be perceived as less reliable and personally subjective. This viewpoint is also supported by Roca-Sales and Lopez-Garcia (2017) and Cano, Doyle and Zhang (2018) who argue that consumers still often prefer to seek out expert advice and opinions, and therefore continue to find fashion magazines more valuable over individual blogs in this respect.

Since its inception, fashion blogging has faced difficulties and criticism from established fashion journalists (Rocamora, 2012; Duffy, 2013), with many questioning the legitimacy and credibility of the activity. Among the many articles criticising fashion bloggers, well-known style journalist Suzy Menkes published her piece 'Circus of Fashion' in 2013, in which she lamented the increasing presence of fashion bloggers within the industry. Menkes made a clear distinction between established industry professionals and fashion bloggers, who she described as 'peacocks gagging for attention'. The article stimulated a lot of discussion online and was criticised by many bloggers who defended their presence in the fashion world by arguing that there was a need to break down the historical, hierarchal structure of the typically elitist industry (Lee and Koo, 2012; Findlay, 2015). For example, fashion blogger Leandra Medine-Cohen of manrepeller.com, published a

blog post titled 'Blog is a Dirty Word', and observed that 'reducing an entire generation of sprouting professionals (the bloggers) to the perpetual black (well, actually neon) sheep of fashion just doesn't seem very open minded', whilst adding, 'Many of us couldn't land the jobs we wanted, so we just made our own' (Medine-Cohen, 2014; Rocamora, 2018).

The backlash from traditional fashion media was still publicly evident in 2016 when four editors from US *Vogue* famously bemoaned and criticised the presence of fashion bloggers attending fashion show events (Topping, 2016; Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020). Sally Singer, the magazine's creative digital director at the time wrote: 'Note to bloggers who change head-to-toe paid-to-wear outfits every hour: please stop. Find another business. You are heralding the death of style'. Nevertheless, regardless of the criticism, *Vogue* continued to feature fashion bloggers throughout its editions, even featuring them on international front covers to help boost sales. For example, Chiara Ferragni, the Italian fashion blogger behind The Blonde Salad, was chosen to feature on the front cover of *Vogue España* in March 2015, making her the first fashion blogger to appear on any *Vogue* cover (Sowray, 2015). Traditional fashion writers may not have liked their new competitors, but could not deny or ignore their value and appeal to consumers.

A number of recent studies have continued to examine and discuss the similarities between blogs and magazines. Ferreira and Vasconcelos (2017) and Lee *et al* (2017) argue that consumers increasingly view blogs as a new form of fashion advertising, particularly magazines, with many drawing comparisons between the two media forms in terms of content, expertise and professionalism. This was noted by Rocamora (2012) and Petersen (2014) who found that blogs are in certain respects simply a reiteration of fashion magazines, and that bloggers will attempt to imitate certain tropes and themes of fashion photography, in order to emulate up-scale fashion publications and advertising campaigns (Marwick, 2015; Nash, 2019). Gil de Zuniga *et al* (2011) and Fischer (2017) also noted how the distinctions between professional and 'citizen' journalist appear to have been blurring online. As a result of their popularity with readers, some blogs have evolved into sought-after mainstream media sites, most notably The Huffington Post, which has been transformed from a blog into an online newspaper. Similarly,

the fashion blog, The Blonde Salad, was originally written by one founding individual, Chiara Ferragni. In 2016 it evolved from a one-woman blog into a 'online lifestyle magazine' offering articles and opinion pieces written by outsourced journalists and members of The Blonde Salad Crew (TBS crew), a team of around 20 individuals who work out of an office in Milan, Italy (Yotka, 2019; Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020).

This development from blog to online magazine helps to illustrates the growing professionalism adopted by some individuals, which was observed by Marwick (2013) and Rocamora (2018) who found bloggers adopting more professional titles such as entrepreneur and journalist, which distanced them from the traditional status of amateur blogger. Whitmer (2020) found that this could be a successful strategy as blog readers may prefer to affiliate with individuals who are perceived as having greater knowledge and expertise, and may be less included to engage with bloggers who come across as more 'amateur' in their output.

Nevertheless, whilst some within the blogosphere may refer to them as journalists, Lenhart and Fox (2006) argue that most bloggers themselves generally do not think of what they do as a form of journalism. Simunic (2017) and Neumann (2018) argue that individuals within the fashion blogosphere can still feel proud and protective about the term 'blogger' and do continue to use it over other, more professionalised titles such as 'fashion journalist'. For these individuals, the term 'blogger' remains a key part of their online identity and self-presentation online. Numerous studies also defend the unique role that traditional bloggers offer and argue that they remain distinctive when compared to other forms of media (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016; Kaiser, 2017). Mole (2019) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020) argue that consumers still tend to place higher levels of trust and credibility in a fashion blog when compared with fashion magazines, and that many consumers continue to value the personal relationship that can be formed with a blogger.

2.6 Electronic word of mouth (e-WOM)

Word-of-mouth is traditionally defined as 'face-to-face communication about products or companies by people who are not commercial entities' (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008:3). It is the passing of information from person to person and can be particularly influential as regards the adoption of new products and services (Kulmala, Mesiranta and Tuominen, 2013; Wright, 2017). Similarly, post-purchase evaluations and experiences shared with others can exert equally considerable influence over consumer product evaluations and purchasing decisions (Bhandari and Rodgers, 2018). Therefore, as online communication channels, such as blogs, have grown, the role of electronic-WOM has been widely researched.

E-WOM is commonly defined as positive and/or negative statements made about a product, company and/or media personality, that are made widely available via the internet (Henning-Thurau *et al*, 2004; Thorson and Rodgers, 2006; Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Jin and Phua, 2014). The effect of e-WOM on customer behaviour has consistently been found in many cases to be more profound than a company's advertising message (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Liu *et al*, 2015; Konstantopoulou *et al*, 2019), as it tends to come from a more trusted source of information i.e. someone known to the consumer, such as a friend, relative, neighbour or colleague, who has already had an experience with the product or brand (Lockie, 2019).

See-To and Ho (2014) argue that e-WOM could have a highly positive impact on consumer decision-making and was now exerting a more powerful effect than traditional advertising approaches. The importance of e-WOM can also be seen in Cao *et al* (2009) who found that 87% of 8,000 participants sampled search-for-product information and appraisals posted by other consumers before making purchasing decisions. As 'information search' has become a fundamental aspect of internet behaviour, online consumers increasingly rely on, and trust, e-WOM interactions (Jung, Kim and Kim, 2014; Gunawan and Iskandar, 2020). Bickart and Schindler (2001), Perse and Lambe (2016) and Lockie (2019) also note that e-WOM can be perceived as a more reliable source of information to customers, as compared to other more hierarchical channels of information created by marketers.

Due to the interactive nature of blogs, bloggers are able to form strong relationships with their readership and, as a result, blog readers are able to connect with others, and exchange information and opinions about their favourite/least favourite brands. Blog readers are able to get emotional benefits from the discussion and the exchange of opinions, more so than other forms of media (Riegner, 2007). For example, Vrana and Zarifopoulos (2010), Dou *et al* (2012) and McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) indicate that the online reviews, evaluations and recommendations that can feature on blogs facilitates e-WOM communication and build blog trust and credibility. This is also argued by Cheung and Thadani (2012) and Thakur (2018), who found consumers can place greater levels of trust in online reviews posted by unknown consumers and/or bloggers, than advertising messages from traditional media. When evaluating the effectiveness of an e-WOM message, Sparks and Browning (2011) and Kim *et al* (2020) found that consumers appreciate and trust negative reviews, as well as positive. Posting negative reviews can actually help to enhance levels of consumer trust. It is also argued that bloggers who post negative product reviews are in fact often perceived as more trustworthy and credible by their readership (Dou *et al*, 2012; Nash, 2019). A recent study by Yang *et al* (2019) found consumers can find more value through negative reviews, and therefore they recommend bloggers to adopt a balance of both positive and negative elements in their e-WOM output, as this can promote greater levels of reader trust, and in turn, a stronger relationship with the blogger.

Successful e-WOM marketing is based on the belief that marketers can harness the inherent credibility of consumer-to-consumer communication (Zhang, Craciun and Shin, 2010; Williams, 2019). Bouhlel *et al* (2010) and Hu (2015) indicated that trust in sponsored advertising content is directly influenced by the consumer's belief that the blogger has nothing to gain from the resulting consumer behaviour. The influence of bloggers originally stemmed from their personal authenticity and impartiality; they have long been expected to demonstrate the qualities of being authentic, impartial and authoritative, but also of being willing to share their knowledge and expertise, which in turn fosters communication and interaction (Frost, Goode and Hart, 2010; Cano, Doyle and Zhang, 2018). In particular, according to Lu, Chang and Chang (2014), the role of fashion bloggers as opinion leaders heavily depends on the extent to which their followers admire and trust

them. Kozinets *et al* (2010) and McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) found that unfavourable responses from followers increased when elements of an e-WOM campaign promoted a sense of 'exclusivity'. This ran counter to the prior narrative blog themes of 'friendliness and inclusion' identified by Yang, Kang and Johnson (2010) and Lockie (2019), themes generally accepted as key elements of the blogosphere value system. A primary concern for bloggers in the current, more commercialised phase in the evolution of the blogosphere must therefore be to balance the inclusion of valuable incentivised material and endorsements without alienating their blog readers.

2.7 Sponsorship and advertising on blogs

As blogs became a significant social-media phenomenon, the commercial sector saw the potential of this new communication channel (Borah, 2015). At this early stage of development, however, the blogosphere was a relatively untested medium and it was not clear how bloggers and readers would react to its impending commercialisation (Haley *et al*, 2014). Some limited forms of advertising material, such as graphical banners and text ads, had in fact appeared within blogs since the earliest days of the blogosphere, suggesting that some companies were very quick to appreciate the potential of this new medium for creating and promoting product awareness (Rocamora, 2012).

By 2006, the marketing consultancy firm Forrester Research had already coined the phrase 'sponsored conversation' to describe the process whereby bloggers were compensated, sometimes by money but more usually by free products and services, for creating their own product content and sharing it with their followers (Dou *et al*, 2012). This new form of marketing communication, which came to be known as consumer-generated advertising or embedded marketing (Jin and Villegas 2009; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017), still depended upon a strong sense of being transparent and authentic.

Before the digital age, Freiden (1984) classified four types of effective advertising endorser: celebrity, high-ranking executive, expert and typical consumer. Using this model, Senecal and Nantel (2004) similarly classified blog types as celebrity,

expert and typical consumer. Armstrong and McAdams (2011) and Peterson (2014) confirmed that when information seekers were searching for product information on the web, they considered the professionalism, content, relevance and integrity of the information source. Wang (2005) also found that consumer impressions about a product were strengthened by recommendations by both experts and typical consumers. More recent studies have examined the key issue of trust. Burns and Lutz (2008) measured the influence that sponsored content has upon consumer brand awareness: higher brand confidence increased the perceived trustworthiness of the blogger. Thus, bloggers featuring products from a trusted online retailer such as ASOS enjoyed increased trustworthiness from their followers (McCormick and Livett, 2012). Consumers also tended to feel that bloggers promoting trusted brands were less likely to use deceptive marketing tactics (Campbell and Wright, 2008). Most significantly, trust in bloggers seemed to have a positive effect upon consumer purchase intentions (Wang and Chien, 2012; Yu and Kim, 2020).

Sponsored posts, paid posts or sponsored reviews can be defined as 'the promoted blog entries or posts that contain links that point to the home page or specific product page of the website of the sponsor for which the blogger receives compensation in the form of money, products, services or in other ways' (Mutum, 2011:9). Wojdynski and Evans (2016) argue that this is not a radically new development: sponsored posts are rather an evolution of the paid insertions seen in most fashion magazines and TV shows. Tutaj and Van Reijmersdal (2012) and Al-Saleh (2017) argue that other forms of media, such as movies, have always carried sponsored products, such as the product placement or embedded marketing that has long been a feature in the film industry, particularly in influential cinema products such as the James Bond franchise.

According to Wojdynski (2016), 'sponsored conversations' fit somewhere between advertising and public relations. Public relations generally involves trying to get a blogger to talk about a specific brand or product in a conversational style to their followers. From the perspective of the advertiser, this can carry an element of risk, as the blogger maintains a high degree of independence, can go off-script and/or may introduce critical elements into their discussion about the product. Instead, companies can secure product placement via advertising in the form of

banners, buttons or text links on a partner blog or social channel. Nevertheless, Hautz *et al* (2014), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) and Wellman *et al* (2020) found that encouraging bloggers to promote the product/service/brand in a positive way, in their own words, tends to result in a much more effective message that better informs and involves the consumers.

In 2014, the online forum for bloggers known as 'Blog Her Community' undertook a survey of its members' attitudes towards sponsorship on blogs. This was an especially significant survey as the BHC members represent a community of experienced bloggers who have had the opportunity to reflect at length upon the trustworthiness of sponsorship and its impact on blogs. The survey confirmed that sponsored content was generally only effective when it came from already well-established, trusted sources. Of 1600 respondents to the survey, 92% looked favourably upon sponsored content in blogs that they already trusted. Of these, 80% used blog product evaluations to reinforce their own purchase intentions.

Also in 2014, Lu, Chang and Chang, considered the criteria that can reinforce the effectiveness of blog sponsorship and identified several important traits: blog advertisement worked best when there was a well-targeted match between blogger and brand; when the blog was written in a style and tone of voice that was sympathetic to the brand identity; and when the overall blog context in which the product was placed was already perceived as reliable, knowledgeable and trustworthy. In addition, Pihl (2013a) and Neal (2017) found that blogger personality variables and the level of blogger interactivity had an appreciable influence on the effectiveness of sponsored blog content. More recently, Hänninen (2016) and Montecchi and Nobbs (2017) note that bloggers must ensure that the relationship with any brand should be made transparent to readers, and bloggers should aim to work with the brand for a long period of time, in order to enhance the transparency of that relationship (Dekavalla, 2020).

Stanton, Ellickson-Larew and Watson (2016:3) also suggested that bloggers must ensure that sponsored posts do not take precedence over 'personal posts' and that they should try to avoid 'selling out'. Jin and Phua (2014) argue that, for a fashion blogger to make a career out of their blog, they must be perceived as 'a real person' who is more accessible and believable than mainstream celebrities and whose credibility is based on their ability to relate to the experiences of average

consumers (Eisend *et al*, 2020; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Table 2.2 below outlines some of the common forms of commercial sponsorship and advertising that can be featured on fashion blogs.

Table 2.2: common forms of commercial advertising found on blogs:

Type:	Description:
Display Advertisements	When a blogger sells advertising space on their blog for a fee. This can include banner advertisements at the top, at the bottom and/or down the side of the web page and/or interactive features such as pop-up windows. Display adverts can be in a variety of formats and can contain items such as text, images, flash, video, and audio. Generally, its main purpose is to deliver relevant advertisements and brand messages to blog visitors (Sudha and Sheena, 2017; Tran and Nguyen, 2020).
Sponsored Content	When a blogger produces content about a brand, product and/or service, in exchange for financial compensation from the company. The company may create the content piece themselves, or allow the blogger to have creative control (Wellman *et al*, 2020). Amazeen and Wojdynski (2018:1) describe it as 'paid content designed to mirror the format of non-paid content'.
Affiliate links	When a blogger is able to generate income through the products/web links that they promote on their blog. Bloggers can join affiliate programmes with companies such as Amazon, and receive a small percentage of profit every time a reader clicks on the link provided and buys the product (Lediard, 2017).
Blog-Brand Related Products	When a blogger has decided to create their own range of products which they promote through their blog channel e.g. write their own book or create their own clothing line. It is common for this to be done

	with the support and financial backing from a company (Zain, Perry and Quinn, 2018), or a venture the blogger embarks on independently. An example of this includes Chiara Ferragni launching her own 'The Blonde Salad' collection of shoes (Neal, 2017).

2.7.1 Industry disintermediation

Industry disintermediation i.e. the reduction/ removal of intermediaries between companies and their target customers, has been a significant development as regards consumer-generated advertising (Crewe, 2013; Lediard, 2017). By utilising bloggers in their campaigns, companies have moved away from using traditional advertising agencies as middlemen and have begun to approach customers more directly through their own corporate websites and social platforms, and via bloggers, who are of course consumers themselves (Mutum, 2011).

Fashion bloggers, who can be drawn from a wide spectrum of individuals in terms of blogging experience and motivation and at base level can be anyone with access to the internet, now have the opportunity to exercise considerable power and influence over high-budget corporate advertising campaigns that were traditionally planned by advertising agencies (McCormick *et al*, 2014; Glucksman, 2017). This development has led to a paradigm shift throughout the advertising world, fundamentally transforming the way that campaigns are created and executed. Traditional advertising companies continue to dominate print and television sectors and have made their own in-roads into the digital sector, but disintermediation has disturbed the traditional advertising models (Wright, 2017).

The rapid growth of this new form of consumer-generated advertising has even brought about the development of a new form of advertising agency: blog talent management, such as the leading UK example, Gleam Futures, which identifies popular bloggers, contracts them, appoints a blog manager and then arranges and brokers collaborations and endorsements with major fashion brands for a

percentage fee. In almost all respects, this is the model of traditional business partnership but transposed to the digital-marketing sector (Lediard, 2017; Maden, 2018). However, this is a specialised aspect of blogger promotion and most fashion bloggers continue to work freelance and find opportunities to organise brand deals and collaborations for themselves independently (Glucksman, 2017). Most bloggers tend to provide contact details on their blog homepage and/or their corresponding social-media channels so that companies and marketing agencies are able to get in touch with them that way. Overall, however, this shift away from the ways in which traditional pre-digital advertising performed is clear, and, as Eagleman (2013) notes, many bloggers are now exchanging the community they have built, that is their acquired cultural capital, for financial gain.

2.7.2 Attitudes towards blog sponsorship

The attitudes of expert commentators in the blogging field towards commercial blog activity differs considerably. Early research suggests that a consumer's attitude towards a particular website can influence their attitude towards advertising on that website (Bruner and Kumar, 2000; Stevenson *et al*, 2003; Poh and Adam, 2005). These studies suggest that, if a website visitor likes the site, advertisements on it will be more effective. Several studies also argue that consumer attitudes towards adverts can affect their attitude towards the featured brand (Vierman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017; Tran and Nguyen, 2020) and Sun (2010) and Haley *et al* (2014) also argue that individual attitudes towards online adverts can be an important indicator towards the effectiveness of online advertising overall. Castañeda, Rodríguez and Luque (2009) investigated the role that consumer attitude towards a website plays as an antecedent in improving attitude towards the sponsoring brand and they identified three separate key concepts: attitude towards the internet, attitude towards the website and attitude towards the brand. Perse and Lambe (2016) and Glucksman (2017) found that blog recommendation of products with high brand awareness could generate a more positive attitude towards the advert, in turn strengthening purchase intention. Evans *et al* (2017) and Lin *et al* (2019) argue that high brand awareness can also improve online readers' trust in the credibility of sponsored content. The attitude of some consumers towards advertising within blogs was also confirmed

by Jin and Villegas (2009), who noted the increasing tendency of many blog readers to avoid this kind of material, especially where they felt under-involved with the product. Souiden, Chtourou and Korai (2017) and Jung (2017) both found that negative perceptions towards online advertising increased with the length of consumer experience.

As early as 2002, Gefen suspected that the increasing use of sponsored content and advertising stimuli on the web was likely to generate consumer distrust and negative perceptions. Kirkpatrick (2006) and Kelly, Kerr and Drennan (2008) both confirmed Gefen's findings. Hajli *et al* (2017) and Yang *et al* (2019) also suggest that sponsored online advertising can provoke both negative and positive responses. Cane (2017) and Makinen (2018) argue that general consumers tend to have negative associations when they are forced to view advertisements. However, Hadija, Barnes and Hair (2012) and Al-Saleh (2017) found that, when an advertiser's message is conveyed through a blogger, the consumer response to the experience can be much more positive. Ma and Chan (2014) and Hänninen (2018) believe that a blogger's followers are likely to already have a positive association with the blogger: otherwise they would not be following them and engaging with their content online. Morris *et al* (2012), Shareef *et al* (2019) and Yu and Kim (2020) agree and argue that, by working with and utilising a blogger for their audience and voice, an otherwise ignored advertisement can be seen in a more favourable and positive light.

Nevertheless, when examining blogger perceptions towards advertising on blogs, Dhanya and Jaidev (2017:39) found that not all bloggers welcome commercialisation, with some describing bloggers who promote products as acting unethically, believing that they have 'sold out and lost their amateur status forever' as a result of featuring adverts. Feng (2016) and Khuong (2016) also add that, whilst fashion companies can receive greater visibility through sponsored blog posts, it can be difficult to track the success of this approach accurately in terms of sales and return on the investment of time and effort.

Therefore, a number of researchers have also recognised the need for greater transparency when it comes to the inclusion of sponsored content. For example, Williams and Hodges (2016) and Wellman *et al* (2020) found that bloggers can be

well aware of the negative impact that being untruthful about commercial collaborations could have on their readership in relation to their overall perceived trust and credibility. Pinjamaa and Cheshire (2016) also found that blog readers were aware of increased commercial activity within the blogosphere, and found banner and side-bar advertisements to be the most irritating feature of current blogs. Nevertheless, the researchers also found that readers still value high-quality blog posts whether or not they feature sponsorship material, and continue to be more influenced by bloggers, rather than traditional media (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

However, some research also argues that bloggers can experience pressure and tension when faced with commercial disclosure decisions and may not always disclose for fear of receiving backlash from their readers (Evans *et al*, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Boerman, Van Reijmersdal and Neijens (2012) and Campbell, Mohr and Verlegh (2013) also note that many bloggers themselves clearly feel that they have an ethical obligation to inform their readers when they are advertising a product. These bloggers clearly understand the frequent resistance of their readers to overt advertisement material, which tends to become less effective and persuasive the more the audience views it as a commercial intrusion (Hänninen, 2018; Eisend *et al*, 2020). Nevertheless, Hunter (2015) and Vierman and Hudders (2020) confirm that bloggers who do not disclose the nature of sponsored material not only run the risk of receiving criticism from their audiences, but risk seriously damaging the trust and community they have built up over a number of months/ years with their readership (Lu, Fan and Zhou, 2016; Hoy *et al*, 2018).

2.7.3 Avoidance of online advertising

Studies in the field have also been interested in examining the reasons users avoid advertisements online. Many studies that have focused on internet users' attitude towards online content and advertisements agree that consumers of material featured on the web have a distinct inclination to avoid advertising (Kelly, Kerr and Drennan, 2008; Boateng and Okoe, 2015). Kelly, Kerr and Drennan (2008) identified three reasons why consumers avoided online adverts: perceived goal impediment, perceived advert clutter and prior negative experience. Of these, goal

impediment was the most significant. Growing consumer annoyance with online adverts has been confirmed by recent studies, such as Hahn and Lee (2014) and Neal (2017) who found an increase in advert scepticism and avoidance behaviour, usually by scrolling down webpages and clicking away from pages containing banner adverts.

McKnight and Kacmar (2007) and Tran and Nguyen (2020) also identified goal impediment as a significant reason for blog advert avoidance. The unexpected appearance of pop-up ads and flashing banner ads disrupted user tasks and encouraged users to abandon the site. Liljander *et al* (2006) had already noticed that advert placing, timing and size impaired interactivity between reader and blogger, and was often simply viewed as clutter. Dehghani *et al* (2016) confirmed that the factors identified above encouraged advert avoidance and found that, of these, advert clutter was the most significant. They also found that an inappropriate combination of these factors triggered negative affective and behavioural responses in blog users. Dhanya and Jaidev (2017) examined perceived intrusiveness, irritation and the avoidance of pop-up adverts and found that users would experience loss of freedom and control of the online environment when they were forced to view an unwanted advert. This would trigger increased psychological reactance, which may lead to increase in perceived intrusiveness, advert irritation and avoidance, findings that have also been supported by Zeng and Seock (2019).

Many television viewers have traditionally found advertising during and between programmes to be a nuisance which they prefer to avoid, and many viewers have developed strategies for avoiding them, such as changing channels, diverting their attention to other things, turning the television to mute, fast-forwarding through advertisements where this is possible, and ultimately either making a cup of tea or turning the TV off. However, users of online channels and social media have not had these options as adverts online are often embedded into social feeds and web pages, and often tend to appear naturally and subconsciously (Haley, Staffaroni and Fox, 2014).

However, the development and adoption of free ad-block software promises to give online readers the ability to avoid certain types of previously inescapable

online advertising. Consumers can now download and install increasingly powerful web applications that allow them to block forms of display/ banner advertisements on a web page (Pujol, Hohlfeld and Feldmann, 2015; Tran and Nguyen, 2020). This has obviously concerned companies that are reliant on featuring these types of adverts. As a result, many have increasingly shifted their focus towards disguised advertising, sometimes now referred to as native adverts, in which the original source of the advert is often obscured, and/or to increase their use of user-generated content (Cane, 2017). This is also confirmed by Halvorsen *et al* (2013) who recognised that companies were beginning to move away from interruptive advertising methods towards finding new methods of reaching consumers in a non-intrusive way. Overall, less intrusive forms of blog advertising, such as paid for articles, continue to be a more popular method, not least because it allows the blogger to create content that is more likely to be welcomed by their specific readers (Hwang and Jeong, 2019).

2.7.4 Blog sponsorship regulations

Another area of contention regarding sponsored blogging relates to potential legislative and regulatory concerns. As fashion companies continue to invest heavily in blog advertising collaborations, many researchers argue that is it becoming more difficult to discern between organic commentary and paid sponsorship (Abidin and Ots, 2017). Josefsson, Rougie and Verboom (2017) and Schauster and Neill (2017) argue that some bloggers fail to properly disclose when they have received compensation from a brand in exchange for positive coverage in a blog post. Cheng and Fang (2015) and Evans *et al* (2017) have also investigated this risk of deceiving their blog audience and failing to adhere to online advertising regulations. Djararova and Rushworth (2017) and Wellman *et al* (2020) argue that bloggers can struggle with the ethical implications of how exactly to disclose any commercial relationships. Wellman *et al* (2020:10) found that bloggers view their legal obligations to disclose sponsorship as 'something they have to do to avoid negative repercussions'. One company that has been particularly criticised in this respect is Izea, a US-based service formerly PayPerPost.com, which was quick to popularise sponsored blog posts, to facilitate relationships between bloggers and brands, and was a market leader in the field

of consumer-generated advertising by 2012 (Hoy *et al* 2018). Doyle *et al* (2012) and Sah, Malaviya and Thompson (2018) showed that the company was criticised because it did not initially require disclosure of the sponsored nature of post content.

As a result, the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC) was quick to recognise this new form of online advertising, and outlined legislation requiring bloggers to disclose any 'material connections' that they had with companies (Schauster and Neill, 2017; Eisend *et al*, 2020). Under these FTC regulations, bloggers who endorse products in return for cash or in-kind payments must disclose the material connections that they share with the seller of the product or service (Farshidi, 2018; Shareef *et al*, 2019). Similar regulations now affect the activities and disclosure of bloggers in other jurisdictions. For example, British bloggers have been required since 28th September 2018 to adhere to guidelines formulated by the UK's leading advertising body, the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA). Increasingly, the ASA has been attempting to discourage deceptive commercial blog practices and to encourage bloggers to label their sponsored posts by including words such as Ad, Advert, Advertisement (Rocamora, 2018; ASA, 2020). Nevertheless, both the FTC and ASA have received considerable criticism, with critics arguing that the guidelines are too lenient (Khuong, 2016; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019), that they rely on an honour system of voluntary disclosure which is not always upheld (James, 2017) and, as Safitri (2017:32) argues: 'vagueness in the guidelines as to whether a simple #ad alongside the blog post is enough'. However, other commentators argue that the guidelines are simple to follow and clearly delineate when and where disclosures should take place (Farshidi, 2018; Reale, 2019).

Berger and Milkman (2012) and Huang (2015) found that some fashion companies do not always require disclosure for sponsored blog posts. In response to this, in 2015, the FTC publicly investigated American clothing store, Lord and Taylor, after it violated FTC blogger legislation (Mutum *et al*, 2018; Goanta and Ranchordás, 2020). The company identified fifty fashion bloggers for the promotion of a specific dress, reportedly paying each blogger between $1000-$4000 to create a series of blog posts about the dress. As noted by Khuong (2016) and Lou and Yuan (2019), many of the bloggers involved in the campaign failed to disclose that they had

been paid to promote the item or that they had been given the dress for free. In March 2015, facing a civil penalty of up to $16,000 for each violation, Lord and Taylor settled with the FTC (Ramirez, 2018; Eisend *et al*, 2020). This is an interesting case study as it highlights that the FTC is prepared to use its powers with serious consequences for companies that seriously flout the official guidelines. Nevertheless, numerous studies continue to argue that not enough is being done to regulate the commercialisation of the blogosphere and ensure that a more regulated approach to sponsorship is adopted (Khan, Daud and Malik, 2015; Ramirez, 2018; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019).

Some studies also discuss the importance of ensuring consumers are able to make distinctions between sponsored and non-sponsored materials. Morrison (2013) and Sah, Malaviya and Thompson (2018) argue that, compared to other forms of traditional advertisements, such as product placement in television shows or celebrity endorsed advertising campaigns, blog sponsorship can be much harder to identify. Boerman, Van Reijmersdal and Neijens (2012) and Carlson (2015) also found that audiences frequently struggle to recognise the difference between paid sponsored content and original unpaid content. Wojdynski and Evans (2016), Hwang and Jeong (2016) and Wellman *et al* (2020) argue that online consumers can have difficulty recognising disclosure terms and phrases when looking at sponsored content online, with many consumers not realising that the term 'sponsored content' signified that the blog content was a paid advertisement (Evans *et al*, 2017; Farshidi, 2018; Goanta and Ranchordás, 2020).

However, Nambisan and Watt (2011) and Kim, Seely and Jung (2017) disagree, arguing that regular blog readers are far more likely than general consumers to identify blog advertisements, as they are more aware that bloggers can receive compensation in the form of free products to showcase on their blog. Nevertheless, regardless of the debate, the FTC (2019) states: 'Under the law, an act or practice is deceptive if it misleads 'a significant minority' of consumers. Even if some readers are aware of these deals, many readers are not. That's why disclosure is important'.

2.8 Blogger pressure

A number of studies focus upon the theme of pressure within the general blogosphere. For example, Cole (2015) and Pinjamaa and Cheshire (2016) found that bloggers can experience increased levels of pressure from being involved in the activity, a pressure which may be related to its growing commercialisation, and the self-induced expectation of ever greater professionalism on the part of the blog creator. This is also noted by Petersen (2014), Pedroni (2015), Ots and Abidin (2017) and Rocamora (2018), who also found that many bloggers tend to feel a heightened sense of pressure when they enter into commercial agreements and collaborations with companies. Duffy (2017) and Schauster and Neill (2017) argue that bloggers can experience a particular tension caused by the need to make blog advertisers happy whilst also ensuring that their responsibility to and relationship with their audience is not compromised. Wellman *et al* (2020) also notes that, when bloggers enter into lucrative, corporate contracts with brands, they are required to modify their content in line with company expectations, which can result in increased levels of stress (Perloff, 2014; Mäkinen, 2018).

In a study specifically focussing on the attitudes of bloggers to the tensions that they experience, Shiau (2014) noted that some can find the initial approach by marketing companies problematic, can feel both flattered and threatened, and can experience difficulties in facing the paradoxes that can result from being 'recruited' as a type of online marketer. However, Riboni (2017) and Safitri (2017) found positive outcomes from this first liaison with commercial companies, arguing that the inclusion of sponsorship can make bloggers evaluate their current activity, consider changing their normal blogging routine and behaviour and doing so in ways that stimulate a more professional, creative output which is actually more aligned to their readers' interests, instead of merely their own (Eckert, 2018; Gunawan and Iskandar, 2020). Hracs, Jakob and Hauge (2013) and Pedroni, Sadaba and San Miguel (2017) have also noted the personal pressures that some bloggers face when adopting more professional practices in order to remain competitive in a saturated blogging sector. Many feel pressure to become a 'top blogger' and to meet growing expectations not just from their reader audience but also from their online blogging peers. Pinjamaa (2016) and Mäkinen (2018) argue that, once they have entered into relationships with commercial sponsors,

bloggers often feel pressure to blog more frequently than before and find that they feel required to put in considerably more effort into each blog post.

When investigating potential pressure derived from readers in more depth, Pinjamaa and Cheshire (2016) have identified three key aspects bloggers consider a rewarding part of their activity: their reader following, feedback from readers and social interaction with these readers through their blog. This confirms the findings of Perloff (2014) and Pittman (2015), who recognised that bloggers face additional pressures when it comes to meeting the expectations of their readers in terms of content standards, amount and quality. Cole (2015) and Fox, Cruz and Lee (2015) also identified the common feeling of many bloggers who felt that they had to increase the amount of content in each post and also post more regularly for fear that their readers might lose interest. Early researchers such as Nardi *et al* (2004) found that the desire to please, interest and retain their readers was a significant motivating factor for encouraging bloggers to not just continue writing but to experiment with creating different content ideas. However, research also suggests that reader expectations can become increasingly demanding. Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2008), Lankinen (2014) and Pittman (2015) all found that blog readers can be disappointed and/or annoyed when a blogger becomes inconsistent with his/her routine of publishing posts. Similarly, Eckert (2018) and Hanusch, Banjac and Maares (2019) found that, when a blogger grows in popularity and following, there are higher levels of expectation and greater pressure to produce content that is consistent in terms of its quality and its regularity. As Baumer, Sueyoshi and Tomlinson (2008:1117) state: 'the more popular the blog, the more that is expected of the blogger'.

Koivisto (2019) and Safitri (2017) argue that this shift towards a more professional blogosphere has also impacted on what it means to be a blogger. Researchers investigating the initial first wave of fashion blogging noted that fashion bloggers would regularly share personal viewpoints, opinions and content that was of personal interest to themselves. Through this self-expression, they had more control over their ability to express themselves, to share ideas and to encourage discussions and debates with their readership (Titton, 2015; Cheung, Vazquez and Conway, 2019). However, these studies argue that, as a result of the pressures generated by ever higher reader expectations, many bloggers have

invested considerably more time in editing content that is targeted towards the interests of their online audience, rather than being simply of personal interest to themselves. This shift is also evidenced by Pedroni (2015) and Findlay (2015), who argue that the commercial pressure experienced by fashion bloggers has brought about a shift from typically random, serendipitous, unsystematic personal content and reflections, towards more routine, formulaic, professional content that draws its inspirations from the structure and presentational forms of fashion magazines. Laurell (2014) and Punjamaa (2016) agree that, as bloggers receive more incentives and become more professional in their output, the fashion blog sector and the blogosphere in general will continue to become less unique and less personal in nature. The features that originally made personal blogs endearing, such as the sense of freedom of self-expression that they projected and the unique perspectives offered directly from the blogger's authentic voice, are in danger of being diluted by rampant commercialisation (Cole, 2015; Eckert, 2018).

Some researchers have argued that the growing expectation of blogging communities can also present a form of pressure. For example, Chai, Das and Roa (2011) and Punjamaa and Cheshire (2016:9) found that the pressure to regularly engage with the ever-growing blog community could be 'overwhelming'. Initially, it was normal for bloggers to share links with one another and to actively comment on each other's posts (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). Nardi *et al* (2004) found that bloggers expected that maintaining a reciprocal relationship with fellow bloggers online was a key element of the activity, and they were therefore keen to engage with other bloggers so that they received comments and interaction in return. This form of reciprocal sharing and commenting behaviour adopted by bloggers online has previously been defined as 'the core of blog communities' (Kumar *et al*, 2004). However, Fox, Cruz and Lee (2015) and Hsiao, Chang and Tang (2016) argue that, due to the growing pressures discussed above and the increase in social media available to bloggers, this fundamental aspect of blogging, the interpersonal interaction between practitioners, has decreased significantly as the community aspect of blogging has changed over time.

Dehghani *et al* (2016) argues that finding relevant blogs that match their personal online interests may be becoming a more difficult challenge for blog readers as

the blogosphere changes over time. However, Hagan (2020) argues that, for bloggers, a new challenge may be the need to more carefully balance the relative amount of personal and commercial content. Hajli *et al* (2017) also add that, as reader expectations continue to change, reaching and maintaining the status of popular 'A-List' blogger will become ever more difficult in the future. Hanusch, Banjac and Maares (2019) add that maintaining a successful blog will require bloggers to have the ability to deal with the aforementioned tensions that exist between their original intrinsic motivation to blog and their growing external commercial interests. Chen and Behm-Morawitz (2018) suggested that the key to balancing these conflicting pressures might be through continuing to use a diary format which helped emphasise the essential personal nature of their output and allowed them to make fashion statements whilst preserving some degree of independence from industry. A large majority of bloggers clearly do still rely on fashion magazines and photos of professional models as key reference points for imitation and emulation. However, a significant percentage of fashion blogs continue to maintain a distinctly personal character and unique narrative on their blog (Ramos-Serrano and Martinez-Garcia, 2016; Cheung, Vazquez and Conway, 2019).

2.8.1 Impact on mental health

In contrast to these pressures identified above, a number of studies argue that the practice of blogging can offer therapeutic opportunities that may possibly make a positive impact on the physical and mental well-being of bloggers (Chung and Kim, 2008; Boniel-Nissam and Barak, 2013; Peek *et al* 2015; Callahan *et al*, 2018; Limatius, 2019). Several studies which examine the nature of participating in online communications argue that writing online in channels such as the blogosphere created a virtual social environment in which the sense of anonymity and invisibility experienced by internet content creators could boost confidence in expressing thoughts and feelings (Tonsing, 2009; Kulmala, Mesiranta and Tuominen, 2013). When communicating online, it was common for many users to feel a sense of release from offline social codes, such as attire, nonverbal gestures and eye contact. They frequently felt able to pay more attention to the act of creating their written content and were able to express themselves more fully as

a result (Lunde, 2013).

Other studies have also suggested that regularly indulging in expressive writing online can be a positive factor in promoting mental well-being: writing can encourage the development of important psychological outcomes such as catharsis, self-expression, venting emotion and releasing pressure (Lewwallen and Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Choi and Sung, 2018). Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) also argued that blogging was an important channel for releasing emotional tension for many individuals. Chen *et al* (2008) and Sah, Malaviya and Thompson (2018) argue that indulging in the types of personal disclosures that are frequently found in blog posts could enhance the writer's feelings of wellbeing. Hoy *et al* (2018) and Bleier, Harmeling and Palmatier (2019) also suggest that writing on a digital platform such as a blog can enhance a number of positive benefits such as free expression, improving confidence in writing and editing, and enhancing overall skills in conveniently communicating with others.

Chung and Kim (2008) and Peek *et al* (2015) found that a number of professional mental-health practitioners advocate participation in blogging in the belief that it offers therapeutic benefits for their patients, especially when they feature issues relating to mental health in their output. The researchers argue that blogs offer a user-friendly platform to share useful mental-health information and knowledge with a broader audience, such as patients and the general public, in a colloquial, conversational manner. Callahan *et al* (2018) notes how blogs that contain features relating to specific aspects of mental and general medical health can serve as a powerful channel for sharing treatment information and mutual support with other individuals facing similar issues and challenges (Lunde, 2013; Lewwallen and Behm-Morawitz, 2016). In this specific area of blogs that relate to health issues, it can be argued that the blogosphere clearly maintains much of its original, social function.

Limatius (2019) argues that blogging which is targeted towards niche communities still offers an opportunity for individuals to express themselves freely and connect with others who share their interests and concerns. With regard to fashion blogging, Motta and Biagini (2017) contend that the fashion blogosphere can still be a space for non-commercial issues and for expressing 'democratic engagement'. Individuals who may not fit fashion stereotypes or physical norms

can use the blogosphere successfully as a powerful tool for self-expression. A number of successful blogs are published by plus-size bloggers who find that this can enhance their feelings of personal self-worth, promote confidence and positive mental-health values, and offer wider social benefits that come from belonging to a friendly and supportive online community (Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie, 2017). As Anderson-Butcher *et al* (2010:74) emphasised: 'blogging can help people to find their voice'.

2.9 Source credibility

Many researchers interested in the blogosphere have focused upon the key themes of credibility and authenticity. Studies into the importance of source credibility in effective messaging can be dated back to the 1930s when researchers began to focus on this aspect of persuasion and its impact upon commercial advertising and political influencing (Arnett *et al*, 1931; Wegrocki, 1934). Early research teams such as Hovland, Lumsdaine and Fred (1949) and Hovland and Weiss (1951) sought to identify the factors that made one source seem more credible to readers/viewers than another. These studies established that audience perception of source credibility was shaped by a number of multi-dimensional stimuli: consumer judgements about the credibility of a source, medium or message involved objective assessments of information quality and accuracy but also subjective assessments of less tangible factors such as trustworthiness and attractiveness. These judgements about credibility were also affected by observable characteristics within the source, the setting in which the reader/viewer was exposed to the source, as well as the specific contents of the message. They also found that audiences judged source messages to be more credible when they were delivered by a communicator who was 'personally admired or a member of a high-status group', and who was judged to possess relevant expertise and trustworthiness and therefore capable of making accurate, valid assertions (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953). Further early studies identified additional factors that contribute to source credibility, such as competence, and dynamism (Berlo, Lemert, and Mertz (1969), objectivity (Whitehead, 1968) and authoritativeness and character (McCrosky, 1966).

More recent studies have emphasised the importance of likeability/attractiveness, defined by Kelman (1961) and Yilmaz *et al* (2011) as the ability to generate a highly positive response from the target audience, in establishing the credibility of a source and the success of its underlying messages (Choi and Rifon 2012; Roy and Pansari 2014). Other studies note that consumer perception of a higher degree of credibility in a particular source has a significant impact upon their overall response to the source and the likelihood of their being persuaded to take a specific desired action (Eisend, 2004; Hansson, 2015; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020).

Many of the findings mentioned above emerged from research either conducted before the digital age or from more recent research which examined generic factors such as credibility and trustworthiness across a range of mass-media messaging, both digital and analogue. However, they offer a background of insights and concepts that are useful when investigating the attitudes and reactions of current and former participants of the blogosphere to the impact of advertising, sponsorship and commercialisation in that area of activity.

Numerous studies have focused upon the effectiveness of celebrity brand endorsements in both the offline and online advertising sectors and in general they have often sought to identify and analyse the specific characteristics and contexts which are most successful in exerting influence upon the target audience (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2003; Shimp, 2003; Egan, 2007; Roy, Gammoh and Koh, 2012; Roy and Pansari, 2014; Hansson, 2015).

Bhatt, Jayswal and Patel (2013) found that celebrity endorsement is particularly influential when target consumers already have a prior perception that the chosen celebrity is an especially credible individual. The effect of the positive characteristics that a celebrity may bring to the source is enhanced when the source itself is deemed highly credible. Other studies emphasised the importance of trust and expertise as key factors in determining the credibility of the endorsing celebrity (Egan, 2007; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Ohanian (1990) noted that positive personal qualities of the celebrity endorser, such as physical attractiveness and likeability, were also often transferred to the brand, which was viewed more favourably as a result. Choi and Rifon (2012: 640) also found that the success of a communication depends on the extent to which it is perceived to be a 'source of valid assertations'. The endorsed message is therefore most effective when the

celebrity endorser is acknowledged as possessing genuine expertise about the particular product or industry (Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). Fashion bloggers are often perceived as possessing a specific expertise in their area of interest and are therefore referred to as micro-celebrities in their own right (Senft, 2008). Researchers have therefore often examined bloggers as a new form of online celebrity endorser, due to their relative power over blog readers and their ability to influence them (Borah, 2015; Hu, 2015). Bloggers are in a position to develop and display some of the key elements that are necessary for online credibility, such as trust, expertise, attractiveness, likeability. As a result, brands have recognised this, incorporating bloggers within their communication and advertising strategies and encouraging bloggers to act as endorsers via sponsored blog posts.

Trustworthiness has also regularly been examined as an important factor when considering and evaluating credibility. Choi and Rifon (2012: 640) define it as providing information in an 'honest and objective' manner. Others identify trustworthiness as the consumer's level of confidence in a source and their degree of acceptance of messages sent to them (Ohanian, 1990). Egan (2007) argues that there can be varying levels of trust: institutional, character-based and process-based. Institutional trust is often described as being based upon professional status and regulations, such as a dentist endorsing toothpaste because they are deemed credible to do so. Character-based trust can involve consumers trusting a personal seller for his/her individual qualities, while process-based trust depends upon a reputation established and developed over time (Petersen, 2014; Meng and Ma, 2019).

Many studies agree that the perceived level of trustworthiness can have an impact on consumer attitudinal change, especially when interacting with other elements of a source, such as its overall credibility. Thus, Ohanian (1990) argues that, when a source displays elements of both trustworthiness and expertise, the impact on consumer attitude can be far greater. Some studies argue that the trustworthiness and expertise dimensions of source credibility may have different weightings. Pornpitakpan (2003) confirmed that a communicator or celebrity perceived as trustworthy exerts more influence upon an audience than someone perceived as untrustworthy, regardless of their relative degrees of expertise. However, Zhu and

Tan (2007) argue that, when a brand communicator is perceived as having a personal/ financial interest, consumers view the source as less trustworthy and the message in a less credible light. Other studies have drawn a distinction between trust and trustworthiness (Gefen, 2002; Hardin, 2002), while McKnight and Kamar (2007) have investigated the importance of information credibility as distinct from the concept of trust. Fogg and Tseng (1991) and Fogg *et al (*2001) confirmed that, as the perceived credibility of both source and communicator increases, high trust levels are generated in the audience. Nevertheless, Pornpitakpan (2003) found that attractiveness, expertise and trustworthiness were equally important factors with regard to consumer purchase intentions. The study found that all three factors impacted consumer involvement with the advertisement message equally.

Source attractiveness is often defined as the extent to which the reader/consumer finds the source material likeable and/or attractive (Choi and Rifon, 2012). Wright (2017) and Choi and Rifon (2012) argue that this factor of source attractiveness is significantly more influential when promoting items that are already deemed highly attractive by consumers, such as luxury fashion and beauty products. Egan (2007) described the subjective basis of this factor as primarily stemming from the degree of individual customer identification with a brand and in particular, its celebrity spokesperson. Many studies argue that a consumer may be positively influenced towards products if they believe they are used on a daily basis by an attractive communicator or in the context of an attractive aspirational lifestyle. However, other studies take a wider view of the concept of attractiveness, arguing that it incorporates various elements, such as personality, lifestyle, skills and characteristics, that a consumer might perceive in a celebrity endorser, rather than simply their physical attractiveness (Patra and Datta, 2012).

2.9.1 Online credibility

In 2002, Johnson and Kaye coined the phrase 'web-believability' when seeking to describe and measure the extent to which online readers developed trust in a blog. A more precise term, source credibility, refers to the degree to which individuals perceived online information as factually true and unbiased (Chua and Chang,

2016). Studies have shown that people judge the credibility of different types of Internet sites by different criteria (Kaye and Johnson, 2011; Arrieta, Peña and Medina, 2019). Readers often assess 'personal blogs' in a different way from other types of blog material, such as more factual company blogs and news media. In differentiating between different levels of credibility for different types of blog, research has suggested two key findings: 1) many blog users often considered personal blogs as a more credible source due to the fact that they are a 'fair' alternative to company-controlled blogs, which reflect the commercial interest of its sponsor (Flanagin and Metzger, 2003; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Senecal and Nantel, 2004) and 2) the most credible blogs are often created by those close to the source, and therefore offer up-to-date and more realistic accounts than traditional news reports (Zhu and Tan, 2007; Kaye and Johnson, 2011).

According to early research undertaken by Fogg *et al* (2001), the trustworthiness dimension of an online source captures the perceived goodness or morality of that source and can be described using terms such as well-intentioned, truthful and/or unbiased. The researchers also found that the expertise dimension captures the 'perceived knowledge and skill' of the source, and can be described using terms such as knowledgeable, reputable and competent. In order to measure online users' perceptions of the credibility of a website, Fogg *et al* (2002) categorised a range of items under four factors, namely, expertise factors, trustworthiness factors, sponsorship factors, and miscellaneous technical factors. A highly credible website will tend to have high levels of perceived trustworthiness and expertise across these four groups of factors (Amelina and Zhu, 2016).

Early researchers (Zhu and Tan, 2007) considered any sponsored material on blogs, such as consumer reviews which might contain targeted and/or biased messages about products, as being the equivalent of online advertising, and the quality of this material had implications for the overall credibility of blogs. Tan, Tan and Teo (2009) and Thakur (2018) argue that the mere presence of commercial content on a blog could have a negative impact on its credibility. This confirmed the earlier findings of Fogg *et al* (2003), that the credibility of websites was reduced when they featured 'distracting' advertisements. Similarly, Redondo and Aznar (2018) found that readers' positive attitudes towards blog adverts decreased as their perception that the adverts might be potentially ambiguous or

even misleading increased. Mutum and Wang (2010) argued that blog followers will accept sponsored content in certain contexts but unexpected pop-up adverts were viewed negatively. Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) found that, when the material connection between blogger and sponsor was openly revealed in the blog post, consumers were less likely to have a negative attitude towards the advertising. More recent research suggests that this may be because followers feel that blogs which are honest about including sponsored material are not trying to mislead or cheat them (Cheng and Ho, 2015; Redondo and Aznar, 2018).

Some researchers argue that blogs still remain an 'uncontrollable platform'. Johnson and Kate (2004) and Huang *et al* (2007) summed up the common arguments against blog credibility: anyone can create one, there is no responsibility for content, information can be posted in an anonymous manner. Moreover, posters may not be bound by journalistic ethics (Banning and Sweetser, 2007; Schauster and Neill, 2017). However, other commentators, such as Colliander and Dahlén (2011: 314), have argued that the very openness of blogging, which requires the exposure of elements of the bloggers' personal life to their readers, strengthens the credibility of individual blogs. Furthermore, the interaction between blogger and reader via conversational comments create and develop feelings of intimacy and friendship which can enhance blogger credibility and make readers more susceptible to the bloggers' opinions (Rubin and Liddy, 2006; Blom, 2017). The more established and/or more prominent the blogger, the more persuasive the items that appear under her name (Colliander and Dahlén, 2011). Other writers, however, argue that this relationship is fragile: the 'friendship' can quickly end if the blogger proves to be biased or damages their credibility in some manner (Johnson and Kaye, 2013; Dekavalla, 2020).

A number of researchers have examined the ways in which bloggers reveal aspects of their personality, how this affects their reception by their readers, and how it helps determine the bloggers' online credibility (Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Klein, Ahlf and Sharma, 2015). According to Sbaffi and Rowley (2017), a blog author's credibility increased if they conveyed a highly personalised 'everyday real-world presence' that was effectively distanced from corporate commercialised messages. For many readers/ consumers, it is important that their fashion information comes from peers, or 'people like me' (Colliander and Erlandsson,

2015). Hahn and Lee (2014) found that a perception of psychological closeness between reader and author also affected the extent to which the blog was perceived as credible. This is possibly why many bloggers have preferred to reveal their true identifies online in recent years whereas they had previously adopted a blog pseudonym or even remained anonymous (Fox, Cruz and Lee, 2015). Disclosing elements of their professional lives could also reinforce the sense that the blogger has life experience that can offer valuable perspectives (Yusuf and Busalim, 2018). Moreover, revealing aspects of one's daily offline identity can be a sign of trust that helps attract and bond with readers (Chittenden, 2010).

While many of the researchers above have emphasised the importance of personal factors in building blog credibility, others have been more interested in the technical aspects of achieving this. Sedeke (2012) noted that bloggers who took care to limit and balance promotional messages within a clear and consistent character narrative were more successful in maintaining trusted relationships with their followers. Cheng and Ho (2015) and Abidin and Ots (2017) argued that blog credibility heavily depended upon specific aspects of the bloggers' output such as quality of blog photography, image count and size of text count.

2.9.2 Authenticity online

Researchers have investigated the concept of authenticity as it relates to several aspects of blogger perception, such as their commercial activity, popularity, psychological well-being, and relationship with readers. Schmidt (2007:1408) found that bloggers are expected to 'practice' a certain degree of authenticity 'while maintaining a balance between staying private and being public'. However, authenticity online is not always easily maintained nor are pressures and tensions easily managed (Mortara and Roberti, 2017).

When examining fashion blogs and bloggers, Marwick (2013:2) used the term authenticity to mean three things: a sense of truthful self-expression, a connection with and responsiveness to their audience, and an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands. Lu, Gursoy and Lu (2015:35) found that fashion bloggers perceived themselves as acting authentically when they felt that their content was seen as being 'unbiased, believable, true or factual'. Fritz,

Schoenmueller and Bruhn (2017) defined authenticity in a blog as the importance of being truthful when communicating and ensuring that blog content is based upon authentic behaviour. Faleatua (2018) sees the key components of authenticity when blogging as self-awareness, consistent authentic behaviour and self-regulation. Bloggers need to be self-aware and align their online behaviour with values that 'constitute their true self'.

However, William and Hodges (2016) and Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, (2020) found that fashion bloggers who begin to feature advertising on their blogs often feel that they run the risk of being deemed to be less authentic communicators than before. They are often wary of losing the trust of their readers and of being labelled 'disingenuous' when taking part in commercial partnerships. Many fashion bloggers are in fact perceived to have become more interested in securing sponsorship collaborations than in providing authentic information and expertise to their readers (Mortara and Roberti, 2017; Gannon and Prothero, 2018). However, Wang and Skovira (2017) and Serazio (2017) argue that, when fashion bloggers continue to promote products on their blog after the conclusion of a sponsorship campaign i.e. they are seen to be using the product on a regular basis, sponsored posts can be met with sustained approval by the audience. McRae (2017) also confirmed that, in general, when bloggers are seen using a sponsored item on a daily basis in real life, their support for the item is perceived as more authentic.

Wellman *et al* (2020) found that, when being rewarded by a company to create content, some bloggers will rely on their own personal understanding of authenticity as an ethical principle, which they believe is at the centre of their blogging brand and audience in the production of sponsored content (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020). The researchers found that, by being true to one's self and to one's audience, bloggers often do feel strongly that they are successfully navigating the sponsored content process in an ethical manner (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). However, Wellman *et al* (2020:7) noted that bloggers can face several specific tensions, such as accepting a deal purely for compensation, which many viewed as an 'ethical misstep'. Other bloggers are aware of authenticity concerns when it comes to turning down sponsorship from

companies seen to be 'off brand' for their blog, which can be difficult for bloggers who may be struggling to generate an income.

A number of studies have also commented upon the tensions that bloggers can face when trying to manage their need to be authentic but simultaneously sustain their popularity and acceptance online. Lim *et al* (2015) investigated the tensions that affect bloggers when they feel that they need to express opinions and ideas that are to some degree inauthentic in order to receive positive feedback/ evaluations from their readers. Lim *et al* (2015) and Whitmer (2020) also found that the desire or need to be popular online and to say things that were well received by one's readers can often encourage bloggers to produce messages and adopt identities/ personas that may not reflect their authentic self. Utz, Tanis and Vermeulen (2012) and Whitmer (2020) found that the continuing need for popularity online was a strong indicator as to how individuals present themselves. Kim and Lee (2011) also found that individuals often choose to present themselves in one of two main ways: either by posting positive projections which offer a highly socially desirable self-image or adopting a more accurate, honest self-presentation. Studies generally found that bloggers who seek high visibility and popularity online tend to engage in positive self-presentational behaviour, while bloggers who anticipate longer-term relationships usually prefer a more modest, honest self-presentational approach (Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn, 2017; Bruns, 2018). As a wider range of social media has emerged, it has become necessary for bloggers to maintain authenticity across additional platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (Marwick, 2014). Many bloggers have increasingly felt the need to adopt more carefully considered, strategic self-presentational techniques in order to conform to changing group norms and perceived trends and to avoid social exclusion (Winter *et al*, 2014). By contrast, experienced bloggers with a secure following can often navigate commercial opportunities more independently, maintaining a set of 'more authentic' blogging values by avoiding sponsored collaborations that may affect their perceived authenticity and overall credibility (Wiażewicz and Zatwarnicka-Madura, 2016; Wellman *et al*, 2020).

Marwick and Boyd (2011b:11) researched another area of tension that can affect bloggers' personal sense of authenticity: bloggers involved in real-time conversations with their readers can on occasion fail to balance 'the desire to

maintain positive impressions with the need to seem true or authentic to others'. They can feel pressure when required to simultaneously manage impressions of themselves while continuing to follow a 'social norm of personal authenticity'. Other studies have noted the potential disparity that bloggers can face when understanding the contrast between their authentic real-world self and their virtual online presence. For example, Reinecke and Trepte (2014) and Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn (2017) found that the ways in which bloggers choose to present themselves online can have significant impact on their psychological well-being, particularly if they are attempting to present themselves in a significantly inauthentic manner. McKinney, Kelly and Duran (2012) and Dumitrica (2014) have also examined the impact that reputational factors, including online narcissism, can have upon the blogger's mental well-being.

When considering the relationship between blogger and reader, McRae (2017:15) argues that an 'authentic blogger' is one that has managed to build and sustain a solid, truthful relationship with their readers. When these authentic bloggers feature a paid sponsored post, it will often appear to be convincingly authentic, even though the audience will be perfectly aware that the blogger has received compensation. The early researchers, Kernis and Goldman (2006), found that consistently creating high-quality content and regularly engaging with readers in depth were effective ways in which bloggers could project an aura of authenticity and so gain and maintain the trust and confidence of followers (Mortara and Roberti, 2017; Faleatua, 2018; Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020).

2.10 Literature review conclusion

This review of the relevant literature therefore highlights several themes that contribute to the first two research objectives.

The review reveals a wide range of academic findings and ways of conceptualising some of the key constructs used in the study. A number of relevant key issues and areas of tension have been identified. These include: the evolution of the fashion blogosphere, the changing motivations underpinning fashion blogging, the impact of the increased commercialisation of the fashion blogosphere, and the overall impact of featured advertising upon blog credibility, trustworthiness and online authenticity.

It is, however, clear that much of the existing research reviewed in the above chapter has been undertaken in terms of examining websites and blogs across the general global blogosphere but with a particular focus upon Asian and American studies. Furthermore, much of this material has concentrated upon the opinions of blog readers/ consumers. Very little attention has been specifically directed towards the attitudes of UK producers of blog material i.e. the actual fashion bloggers themselves. Nor have studies looked at the range of different opinions within this particular group. In addition, almost no attention has been paid to the views of lapsed fashion bloggers and the reasons for their discontinuing to blog. In these two respects, there is a clear gap in the literature. Therefore, the specific attitudes of UK active and inactive fashion bloggers require further study.

2.11 Development of research questions

As a result of the literature review, a number of research questions have been developed for the purpose of examining selected areas of interest regarding the attitudes of fashion bloggers towards sponsorship on fashion blogs. These research questions have been developed in correlation with the research objectives with specific attention to the following criteria:

- motivation for creating and continuing the blog
- design, content and style of blog output
- perception of the blogger's role *vis-à-vis* followers and sponsors
- editorial and ethical pressure resulting from sponsorship
- perceived effect of sponsored content upon followers
- general effect of sponsorship on the blogosphere overall.

- **Research Question 1:** To what extent, if at all, have bloggers' original motivations for starting a blog been affected by the inclusion of sponsorship?

- **Research Question 2:** Has the inclusion of sponsored content changed the content and style of the fashion blog? If so, in what ways and to what extent has this affected blogger self-perceptions?

- **Research Question 3:** Are there any pressures felt by bloggers as a result of accepting financial and other material rewards of sponsorship?

- **Research Question 4:** How has blogger perception of the rules and code of conduct affecting their practice changed as the blogosphere has become more commercial over time?

- **Research Question 5:** What impact, if any, do fashion bloggers think the inclusion of sponsored material has had on their perceived credibility and trust, particularly in the eyes of their followers?

- **Research Question 6:** How has fashion bloggers' own perception of the status of blogging and of themselves as bloggers changed over time?

Chapter Three:
Research Philosophy and
Methodology

Chapter Three: Research Philosophy and Methodology

This chapter discusses relevant research approaches that were considered in order to identify an appropriate research strategy and methodology for this specific study. Effective research design requires planning that involves decisions in areas such as procedures of enquiry and specific methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The chapter will therefore explain the context and rationale for the selection of an interpretivist, qualitative approach to investigate the attitudes of fashion bloggers towards the credibility of sponsored content on fashion blogs.

The most appropriate research methods for this study were identified as online questionnaires and in-depth interviews, and both methods used a qualitative approach overall. An online questionnaire was identified as a suitable method in order to reach the desired target participants, many of whom were most easily accessible via the internet (Waller, Farquharson and Dempsey, 2015; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Although questionnaires are typically associated with quantitative research, for this particular study, the method followed an interpretative design, requiring participants to provide in-depth answers to each question. A preliminary pilot qualitative questionnaire was undertaken with twenty active fashion bloggers across the UK, which helped to inform the design of the main study. In total, 307 valid questionnaire responses were collected. A more detailed rationale for the use of this qualitative approach can be found within the chapter.

The online questionnaire was followed by in-depth interviews with a select number of fashion bloggers [active and inactive] across the UK, in order to provide additional, extended commentary on issues and themes that had arisen from the questionnaire. Five pilot interviews were conducted to help confirm the suitability and viability of this chosen method, and in total, 28 interviews were conducted.

The research therefore adopted an interpretivist, qualitative, multi-method approach for which further explanation and rationale will be discussed throughout the chapter.

3.1 Research philosophy

In order to ensure the validity of a research study, the issues underpinning its philosophy must be considered. These include the kind of evidence required, the method of collection and interpretation, and whether the evidence provides answers to the specific questions under investigation (Panke, 2018). Researchers in the social sciences draw upon varying assumptions when developing their chosen methodologies, and an awareness of ontological and epistemological approaches can offer useful insights and increase research quality (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010; Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2018).

Much of social-science research can adopt either an ontological and/or epistemological philosophy on how the nature of the social world can be viewed, how it can be understood and how knowledge can be gained (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Ontology can be described as the study of 'what there is', including 'what is possible'. An epistemology philosophy, on the other hand, is concerned with knowledge, what constitutes knowledge and how we can obtain it (Dawson, 2019), and this was the adopted philosophy of this specific research study. Philosophical assumptions regarding the research topic can impact upon how a particular phenomenon can be understood, and therefore it was important to ensure that any assumptions made must remain consistent throughout the research process (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2015).

3.1.1 Epistemological perspective

Babbie (2010) draws an important distinction between epistemology, defined as the science of knowing, and methodology, the process of 'finding out'. Crotty (2008:3) describes epistemology as 'a way of looking at the world and making sense of it' and suggests that knowledge is constructed through the interaction between people and objects. An epistemological research approach tends to be concerned with the ways of learning and knowing about the social world e.g. 'how can we know' and 'what is the basis of this knowledge?' (Dawson, 2019). The researcher's own awareness of the impact that personal epistemological attitudes can exert is discussed further at section 3.3.

Epistemological knowledge can be produced and defined through deduction and induction, the criteria by which knowledge is possible (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Deductive reasoning begins with abstract conceptualisation, which is then tested through the application of theory, in order to create new observations. Inductive reasoning allows the data to guide the research and build theory accordingly (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015).

This study takes an inductive approach, with theories and ideas formulated towards the end of the research as a result of observations (Panke, 2018). Inductive reasoning was identified as the most appropriate method, as the study has identified recurring patterns and themes emerging from the primary data (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2010). This approach can be flexible and especially effective when collecting and collating information of a subjective nature (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Further discussion of this selected approach can be found at section 3.5.6.

3.2 Research paradigm

3.2.1 Positivism

Social scientists often differentiate between research approaches that are positivist or interpretivist, and this study necessarily contains aspects of both approaches. The positivist approach, sometimes called the 'scientific method', attempts to measure social phenomena through objective methods in order to reach a quantitative outcome (Gunn and Faire, 2016). Positivist research tends to use quantitative methods such as consumer surveys to collect reliable and valid data (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2018). Positivist methods however can be inflexible, require time for data analysis and may be ineffective when trying to understand, process or generate theory (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2015). In addition, they can be limiting when investigating complex aspects of human behaviour (Gummesson, 2017), a potential disadvantage with regard to the research objectives of this study.

3.2.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivist research approaches typically use qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, to facilitate investigation into aspects of human behaviour including thoughts and feelings (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012), and gain a deeper understanding of the subjects' opinions and perceptions concerning a particular phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Interpretivist researchers try to establish meaning by stimulating individuals to reflect on their experience and understanding of the world (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). However, the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative data can be time-consuming and problematic (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). Interpretative researchers can never be entirely confident that they have fully recorded their subject's experience, or that their interpretation of data is entirely accurate (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Nevertheless, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for this specific study, which examines subjective perceptions and views regarding blogging motivation and credibility.

The Research Onion model (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015) is helpful in illustrating the steps that can be taken before research decisions can be made [Figure 3.1]. It outlines the interrelationship of different approaches and factors ranging from philosophy to methodology, which must be taken into account when designing a research project (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). An adapted version has been included to show the planning process for this particular study [see Figure 3.2].

Figure 3.1: Research Onion displaying the layers of research design (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015).
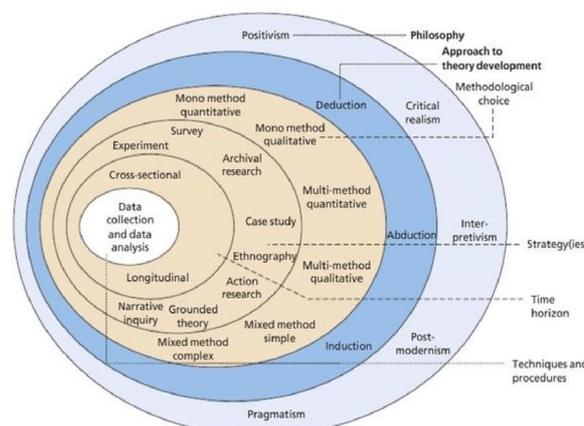
Figure 3.2: An adapted version of the Research Onion to show the key layers of this specific research study.

Online Questionnaire and Interviews · **Multi-method Approach: Qualitative Overall** · **Phenomenological** · **Inductive** · **Interpretivist**

Data Collection Method · Research Strategy · Research Philosophy

Research Methodology · Research Approach
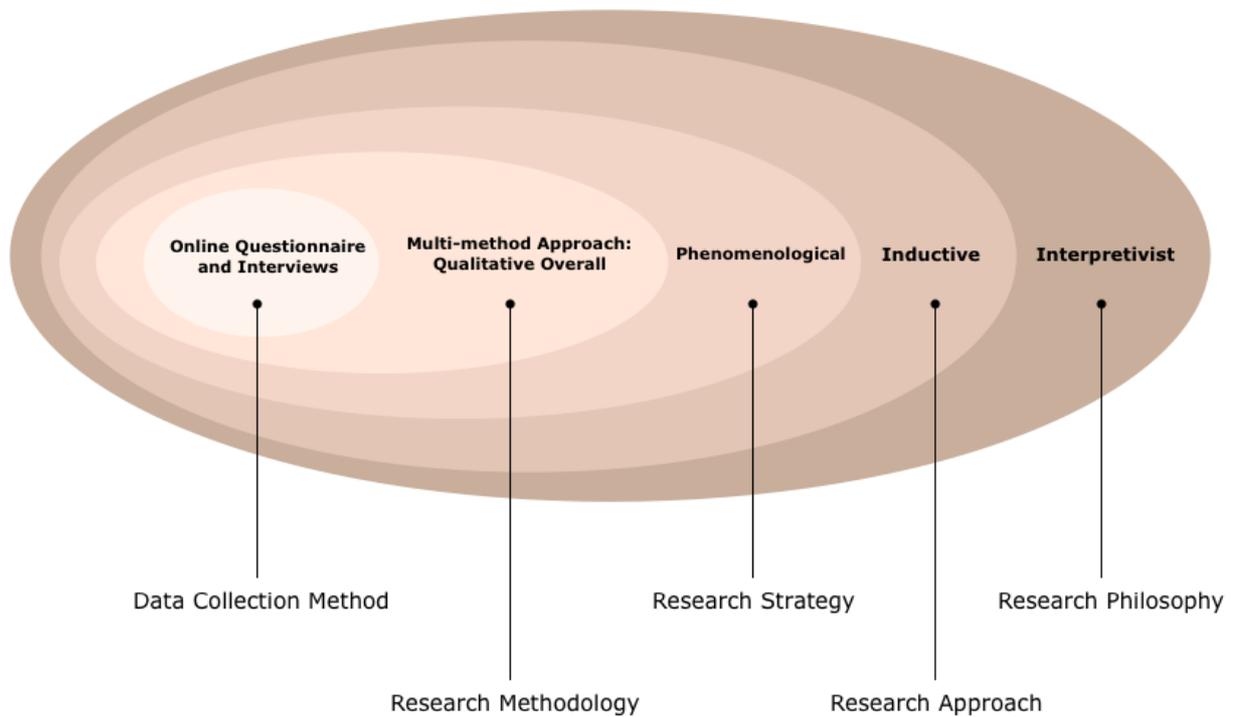
(Source: Author, 2020).

3.2.3 Multi-Method approach

A multi-method research design can help researchers gain a better understanding of the issues under examination by providing opportunities to collect data from differing methods, and to analyse that data by using a variety of theoretical principles (Bryman, 2015). Specialised techniques, such as linked questionnaires and interviews, can be used to gather subjects' in-depth responses about attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards phenomena (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Corbin and Strauss (2015) indicate that multi-method approaches can offer a greater depth of understanding about the emotional and contextual aspects of human behaviour. Utilising a number of methods can allow researchers to develop a more complete understanding of a problem and compare, validate or triangulate results to provide further illustrations of context for trends, experiences or processes (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2018).

However, in order for a multi-method approach to be effective and valid, care must be taken to ensure adequate sample size and relevance. In addition, thought must be given to ensuring that sample responses can be confirmed (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012).

This study therefore adopted a multi-method, qualitative approach, utilising both online questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The methods were executed in a sequential manner, with the online questionnaire informing the development of the in-depth interviews.

Questionnaire data was collected over a three-month period, and was analysed in an inductive, thematic manner using both manual methods and NVivo11 software. Further discussion of the analysis process can be found at section 3.6 below.

Once the questionnaire data had been analysed, study participants who were willing to take part in the interview stage were selected. This second stage of enquiry was designed to allow participants to explore, expand upon and contextualise the issues and findings that had emerged from the questionnaire in more depth. The emergence of these themes helped to form the basis of relevant interview questions. See Figure 3.7 and 3.8 further in the study which illustrate key questionnaire findings in diagrammatical format.

By conducting the in-depth interviews, participants had a further opportunity to share and expand upon specific examples/ stories/ incidents that had taken place in their blogging experience. This opportunity to elicit extended commentary encouraged a fuller range of comments on themes which had already emerged at the questionnaire stage, but which now received a more detailed explanation. In addition, interviewed participants offered information about aspects of their experience as bloggers that had not been offered at the questionnaire stage. These included more personal issues and reflections that related to topics such as their eating disorders, their reluctance to talk about controversial/ political topics and their experience of inter-blogger hostility. Several participants also discussed the possible negative consequences that involvement in fashion blogging could have upon participant personal confidence and mental health. This second interview stage was therefore a successful strategy in that it encouraged deeper reflection by the participants on more sensitive aspects of their time as a blogger.

Figure 3.5 below demonstrates how differing abstract paradigms can feed into design decisions as to whether to adopt a qualitative or quantitative approach, with a corresponding influence upon the final choice of method.

Figure 3.3 Differing Research Paradigms
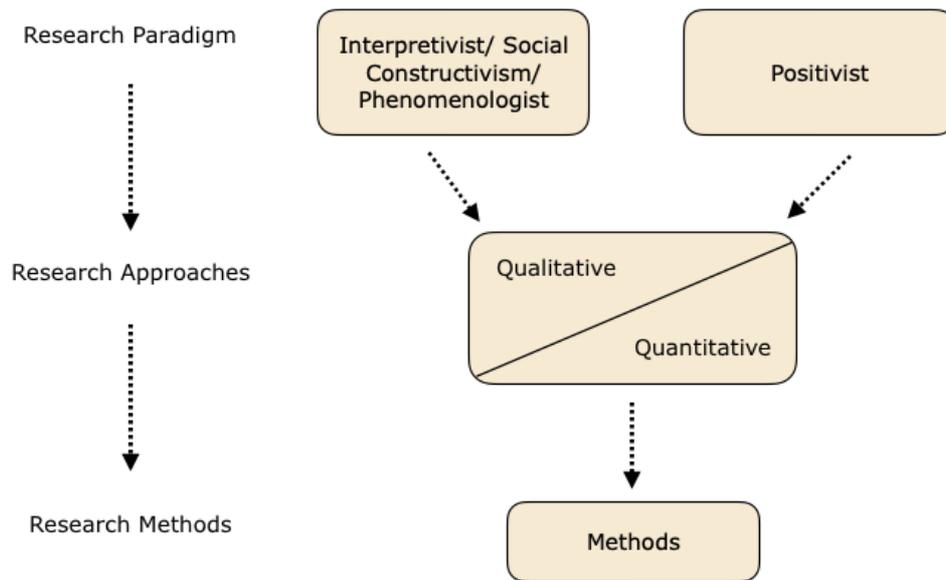
(Finn *et al,* 2000).

Figure 3.4 illustrates some of the differing research choices that can be made. As stated above, this research adopted a multi-method approach, utilising two different qualitative methods.

Figure 3.4 Differing research choices
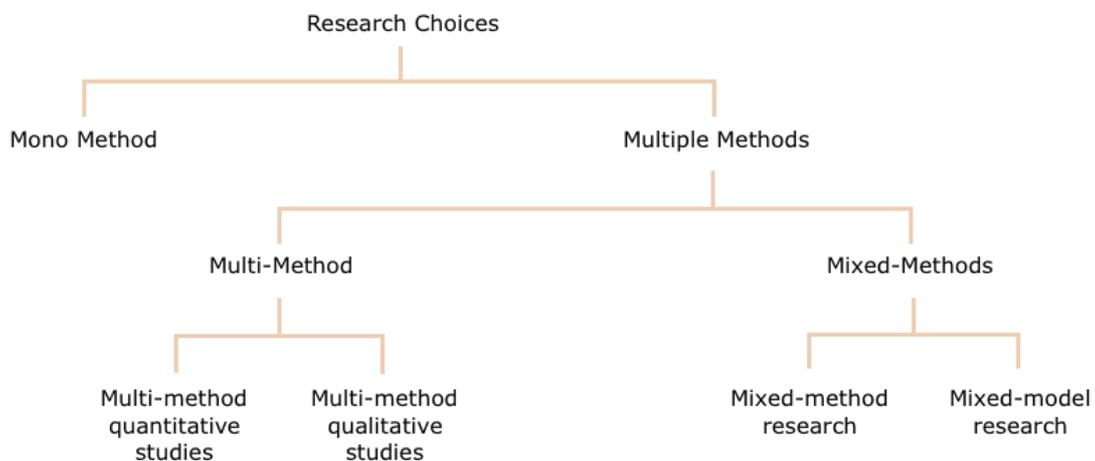
(Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015).

Therefore, Figure 3.5 illustrates the decision pathway adopted for this particular study from research theory to approach and final method.

Figure 3.5 Selected research pathway for this study

(Source: Author, 2020).
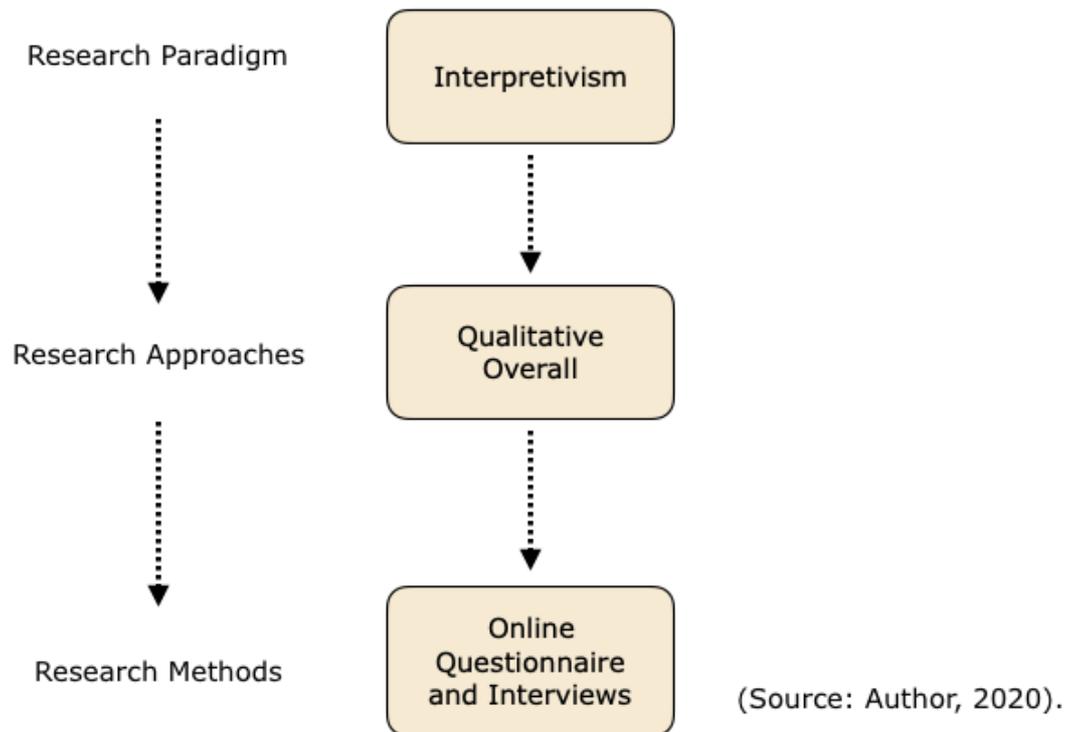
3.3 Philosophical perspective and researcher subjectivity

Phenomenological research often begins with an experience or condition and, through the narration of the participants' subjective views and attitudes, investigates the effects of that experience (Willis, 2008: Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015). A phenomenological research approach offers the opportunity to examine and understand the differing perspectives of participants concerning an experience (Berg and Lune, 2012). However, the potential subjectivities of a researcher in relation to the studied phenomenon can lead to misinterpretation of the data and distortion of the results, regardless of the thoroughness of the research (Gunn and Faire, 2016: Dawson, 2019). Researchers therefore must recognise that their own background can shape their interpretation of phenomena and data, and should 'position' themselves in the research to acknowledge how their particular interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural and social experiences (Gibbs, 2018).

Due to the dynamic nature of fashion blogs (Rocamora, 2018), this research study lends itself to an interpretative, phenomenological approach, where the purpose of the research is to examine particular aspects of fashion blogging (Nash, 2019). This study has adopted a qualitative view as this helps understand a phenomenon by studying what people think about it, by analysing their opinions, attitudes and perceptions, and identifying and understanding the meanings that are important to them. However, a frequent difficulty when conducting research of this nature is that the researcher must be able to understand an experience from the point of view of the individuals involved, and not impose bias upon the research results, whilst also executing a careful balance between the participant's 'voice' and the researcher's ability to 'make sense' of it (Larkin and Thompson, 2012:101).

Researchers must therefore remain aware of their personal subjectivities and attempt to approach phenomena with an open mind (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This is an important consideration when the researcher is actively involved in the study field, as in this case. It is equally important to note that the choice of research approach can be influenced by the research questions, existing research literature, and existing conceptual frameworks (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012: Ritchie *et al*, 2013).

The classical sociologist, Norbert Elias, focused heavily on research psychology and what he termed 'Theory of Knowledge' (Elias, 1978). This theory discussed the need to self-consciously distance oneself from the object of study through detachment. The researcher's own experience and involvement with the fashion blogosphere has been influential in the creation and development of the specific research idea and focus. Acknowledging any personal bias is crucial in social science research to help achieve objective results and enable accurate analysis and reflection. Therefore, the researcher has engaged with as much existing relevant literature as possible, becoming familiar with varying viewpoints and opposing arguments, in order to understand the wider historical context in which the research sits.

It should also be noted that, since the beginning of this specific research study [October 2017], the researcher ceased all blogging activity. This included all interaction with sponsoring companies in order to help create a degree of distance between herself and the activity and remain as objective as possible. Nevertheless, her previous links to the fashion blogosphere have been helpful to the research. The fact that the researcher had experience and knowledge of the fashion blogosphere may have helped to encourage the high response rate: 20 volunteers for the pilot study in December 2018, and the total of 307 volunteers for the full online questionnaire enlisted for the study very quickly. Again, the researcher's knowledge of blogging issues was helpful in the process of approaching and interacting with respondents, particularly those selected for the in-depth interview. Moreover, the researcher's knowledge was exceptionally helpful in the process of organizing and analyzing participant responses.

This naturally raises the question of researcher bias where assumptions towards the research and about the group to be studied may have already been formed. However, the focus of this research was particularly upon how fashion bloggers feel towards sponsored content within the blogosphere, and the point of view was strictly focused upon the thoughts and responses of the bloggers themselves. The methodology was designed around phenomenology as a theoretical belief and interpretivism as a philosophical standpoint (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015).

3.4 First phase of research: online questionnaire

3.4.1 Research methodology for this study

The principal research method chosen for this study was an online questionnaire, a method typically associated with quantitative approaches (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). However, this method was selected since it was judged to be the most appropriate method in order to reach the desired participants, many of whom, as noted above, are most easily accessible online (Waller *et al*, 2015).

Research has been undertaken to understand the use and validity of this approach. A number of academics have investigated and implemented the use of qualitative questionnaires, and promote the use of this typically quantitative method in a qualitative manner (Cabitza and Locoro, 2017: Eckerdal and Hagstrom, 2017). As such, the questionnaire followed an interpretative design, requiring participants to provide in-depth answers to each question in order to encourage responses of a more subjective nature, which were then analysed in an interpretative manner. It was therefore possible to extract and study aspects of the participants' thoughts and feelings in a way that offered opportunities to gain adequate insight into their personalised responses to the study phenomenon.

In addition, research participants who had completed the questionnaire were then invited to participate in the second phase of research, an in-depth interview, designed to gather their more focused, in-depth attitudes to the issues revealed by the first phase of the research.

3.4.2 Research participants

This research aimed to critically review the attitudes of three identified groups of fashion bloggers within the UK: active younger bloggers, active older bloggers and a final group of bloggers who had discontinued their blogging activities.

The study initially concentrated on identifying a group of current bloggers who were active within the fashion blogosphere, and who had incorporated commercial involvement such as sponsorship within their blog output.

For purposes of appropriate data comparison, the researcher made a conscious decision to examine this group in terms of two distinct age profiles in order to determine if there were any differences/ similarities between the values and attitudes evident in the responses of bloggers of different ages towards the themes under consideration. The selected groups were a) bloggers in the under 30 age bracket and b) bloggers in the over 50 group, and the initial questionnaire was designed to eliminate volunteers outwith these groups.

All of the respondents that took part in the study were female. A small number of male fashion bloggers [six] were contacted for their input, however the researcher did not get a response.

3.4.3 Active blogger criteria and rationale

The online questionnaire was sent to a wide selection of active fashion bloggers that are based in the UK. A number of relevant blogging groups/ communities found on social media were identified and utilised to attract questionnaire participants. Bloggers were also identified and contacted directly by the researcher via their blogs and various social-media channels such as Instagram. This initial active group comprised experienced bloggers, many of whom included sponsored material in their output. Group members often had a significant and long-standing presence online and therefore potentially exerted considerable influence over consumers interested in the sector (Rocamora, 2018). Almost all research participants were aware of, and had developed opinions about, sponsorship and the growing commercialisation of the fashion-blog sector. Moreover, each selected participant had been blogging actively for at least 12 months before the start of the study in October 2017 and they had followers who commented on a regular basis.

3.4.4 Inactive participant criteria and rationale

In addition, the research also aimed to identify a group of UK fashion bloggers who had decided to suspend and/or end their blogging activities. This group was included in the study to help identify the extent to which the increased use of sponsorship in the overall fashion blogosphere may have impacted on their blogging activity.

Participants for this part of the study were sourced from a previous research project conducted by the author in 2015. The researcher discovered that many bloggers who took part in the 2015 study had now ceased blogging activity, but still had an active presence on other social-media channels such as Facebook and Instagram. The researcher was able to reach out to these individuals in order to try to understand the reasons for this discontinued blogging activity. This group is smaller in size and therefore the criteria for selection was more flexible. Nevertheless, all of the inactive research participants were under the age of 30, had had experience of blogging for a sustained period of time, and were aware of and/or had accepted blog sponsorship during their time blogging.

3.4.5 Online questionnaire design

Online questionnaires are a widely used research method within the social sciences and are accepted as a potentially valid means of collecting participant data (Berg and Lune, 2012). Questionnaires can provide an effective means of measuring the behaviour, attitudes and opinions of relatively large numbers of subjects in a cost and time-effective manner. Online questionnaires can allow subjects to input their responses at their own pace and convenience (Dawson, 2019). They are also appropriate when surveying a target group dispersed over a wide geographical area, as in this study.

Some principles of effective online questionnaire design include: ensuring that all questions add value to the collected data; all questions are clear, numbered and ordered in a way that is logical for the participant; all similar themed questions are grouped together (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Techniques such as 'funnelling' and 'routing' help the participant and researcher to navigate the questionnaire (Ekinci, 2015).

However there are a number of limitations to this method that need to be considered: in particular, the lack of an interviewer present to clarify and probe responses, the lack of information that may be submitted, and research respondent misinterpretation (Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink, 2015). Nevertheless, it was still identified as an appropriate method for the first phase of research. Further critique of the method can be found at Table 3.1 below.

Given the absence of an interviewer to assist participants, it is important to use questions that are simple to understand and easy to complete in order to gather useful and relevant information. Considerable thought must also be given to the types of question asked (Cabitza and Locoro, 2017: Eckerdal and Hagstrom, 2017). Typically associated with quantitative research, questionnaires tend to ask closed questions in a way that directs answers towards categories that have already been decided by the researcher such as "yes/no". These restricted responses can easily be converted into quantitative data but lack detail and can hinder participants from submitting in-depth, subjective attitudes towards a topic. In contrast therefore, in this study participants were asked open-ended, qualitative questions that allowed them to express their view of more complex questions that require detailed explanation and discussion [see Figure 3.6 below].

Figure 3.6 Structure of Questionnaire Design

(Source: Author, 2020).
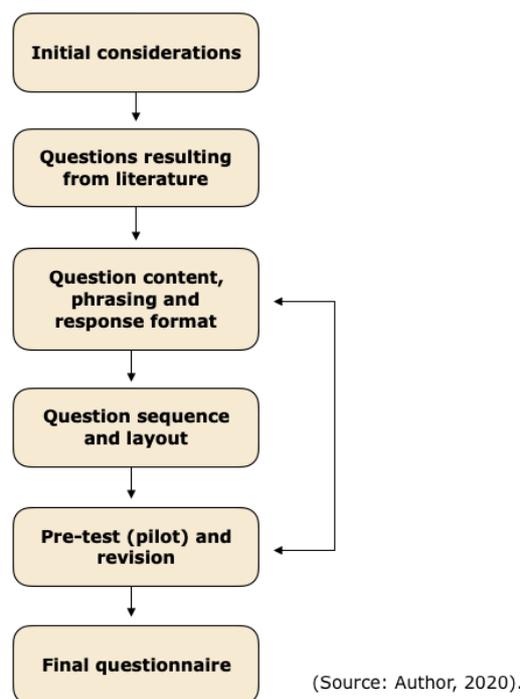
The main advantages and disadvantages of online questionnaires are identified in Table 3.1 below. Despite the acknowledged potential limitations, it was still considered to be an appropriate method for this particular chosen study.

Table 3.1 Advantages and disadvantages of online questionnaires

Advantages	Disadvantages
● **Low costs:** collecting data can be inexpensive, a number of free programmes, such as Google Forms, can be used, and no face-to-face interaction with interviewer is required. ● **Automatic and real-time access to data:** research respondents can input their own data which is automatically stored. ● **Ease of data gathering:** this method offers the ability to collect rapid responses over the internet in a relatively short period of time. ● **Increase in response rates:** online questionnaires can be a convenient method for research participants who are able to answer at their own speed, chosen time and place. ● **Time effective:** this method can be created and distributed to a large target group in a small amount of time. ● **Design flexibility:** questionnaires can include skip patterns and limited-choice questions which can help to cut down error. ● **Absence of interviewer:** research respondents can be encouraged to share personal information because the questionnaire is anonymous and confidential.	● **Lengthy response times:** research respondents may take time to complete and return the questionnaire. ● **Submission errors:** respondent submissions can include human errors which can make them invalid for use in a study. ● **Lack of information:** research respondents may complete questionnaire as quickly as possible, resulting in superficial answers. ● **Lack of qualitative approach:** quantitative questionnaires can be inadequate for studying some forms of respondent information or action i.e. changes of behaviour, feelings, attitudes and emotions. ● **Absence of interviewer:** the lack of an interviewer present to clarify and probe responses may result in less helpful data. ● **Lack of respondent honesty:** there may be a limited opportunity to assess the honesty of responses. ● **Misinterpretation:** research respondents may offer responses based on their individual interpretation of the question.

(Source: Author, 2020, adapted from Bryman 2012, Clough and Nutbrown, 2012 and Gibbs, 2018).

3.4.6 Pilot questionnaire

A pilot questionnaire was conducted between December 2018 and January 2019, and 20 valid responses were collected from active bloggers. The questionnaire was piloted with a small number of responses to check research participant understanding, review the use of open-ended questions, and highlight potential areas of confusion, such as routing errors. The pilot questionnaire allowed opportunity for amendments, and also provided the researcher with an estimate of average respondent completion time.

The initial responses indicated that the questionnaire was effective in collecting both subjective and practical data and confirmed that the research topic was a valid and relevant area for further investigation. The pilot questionnaire was designed using Google Forms free software. This provided an efficient and effective platform to host the questionnaire and facilitate sufficient response. It also provided the researcher with confidence to host the main questionnaire through this platform, as it was an effective data-gathering tool (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018: Dawson, 2019).

3.4.7 Question rationale

The questions for the online questionnaire can be found in Table 3.2 below. A rationale is provided for each question, as well as further information to illustrate how the questions relate to the overall Research Questions and link to key literature. When designing the questionnaire for the inactive blogger participants, the questions remained the same, however were phrased to reflect blogging in the past tense.

The questionnaire comprised seven sections as follows: 1) initial information gathering about the respondents and their blogging experience, 2) information gathering about their general interest in other blogs, 3) information gathering about their initial motivations to commence blogging, 4) opinion gathering on their attitudes to issues relating to sponsorship on blogs overall, 5) opinion gathering on their attitudes to adopting sponsorship on their own blog, 6) opinion gathering about their specific attitudes towards fashion blogs, 7) opinion gathering about their perceptions about reader reaction to sponsored content in their blogs.

Table 3.2 Online Questionnaire question rationale

Question	Rationale for Asking	Relates to Research Questions and/ or Key Themes and Literature
Section One: **This section is designed to gather some brief information about you and your blogging experience.**		
Blog Name	To provide contact details for blogger if further information/elaboration required.	-
Age	To provide comparable data in the analysis stage.	-
Date when you began blogging?	To provide data to gauge the experience of the blogger.	-
How often do you post new material on your blog?	To gauge the relative enthusiasm and expertise of individual bloggers.	-
Approximately how many followers do you currently have on your blog?	To provide an indication of the success and potential influence of respondents.	-
Section Two: **This section is about your general interest in fashion blogs.**		
Do you read other fashion blogs?	To measure respondent overall interest in the fashion blog sector.	-
If yes, approximately how many hours a week to do spend looking at fashion blogs?	To provide comparable data in the analysis stage.	-
What features do you think make a fashion blog useful/enjoyable to read?	To encourage respondents to comment on their	RQ3. Theme: Blog Credibility.

	preferred aspects of fashion blogs.	Reading: (Ohanian, 1990; Fogg *et al*, 2001; Metzger, 2007; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Shiau, 2014; Cheng and Ho, 2015; Neal, 2017; Abidin and Ots, 2017).
Section Three: **This section is about the reasons why you started blogging.**		
What were your motivations for starting your blog?	To identify the general aspects of blogging that initially appealed to the respondent.	RQ1. Theme: Motivation. Reading: (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Chen, 2015; Hall, 2017; Ramirez, 2018; Mutum *et al*, 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020).
Which of the options below was your most important motivation for starting your blog? Personal Hobby To Make Friends Online To Make an Income Career Enhancer Marketing Tool for Established Business. Other…	To identify the key aspects of blogging that initially appealed to the respondent.	RQ1. Theme: Motivation. Reading: (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Chen, 2015; Hall, 2017; Ramirez, 2018; Mutum *et al*, 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020).
Is this still your main motivation in continuing to blog?	To ascertain whether blogger motivations have evolved from blog inception.	RQ1. Theme: Motivation. Reading: (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Chen, 2015; Hall, 2017; Ramirez, 2018; Mutum *et al*, 2018;

		McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020).
If your main motivation has changed since you started blogging, please explain why this is the case.	To provide opportunity for respondent to elaborate on the reasons why their motivation has changed over time.	RQ1. Theme: Motivation. Reading: (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Chen, 2015; Hall, 2017; Ramirez, 2018; Mutum *et al*, 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020).
Do you have a long-term goal for your blog?	To identify respondent aspirations for their blogging career.	RQ1. Theme: Motivation. Reading: (Nardi *et al*, 2004; Zhu and Tan, 2007; Chen, 2015; Hall, 2017; Ramirez, 2018; Mutum *et al*, 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe, 2020).
Section Four: **This section is about the use of sponsored content in your fashion blog.**		
Have you featured sponsored material on your blog?	To provide key differentiation data between sponsored and non-sponsored bloggers.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading: (Bernoff, 2009; Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).
IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS NO:		
IF NO: Have you been offered sponsorship/	To identify non-sponsored bloggers who have chosen	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6.

compensation from a commercial source?	to refuse sponsorship or not.	Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading: (Bernoff, 2009; Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).
IF NO: If you decided not to include sponsored material on your blog, what were your reasons for this decision?	To provide opportunity for a variety of reasons for refusing sponsorship to emerge in the data.	RQ1. RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading: (Bernoff, 2009: Pihl, 2013: Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014: Haley *et al*, 2014: Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017: Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).
IF RESPONDENT ANSWERS YES:		
IF YES: How long have you featured sponsored content on your blog?	To measure the blogger's likely expertise in handling sponsored content.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5. Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading: (Bernoff, 2009; Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).
IF YES: How often do you include sponsored material on your blog?	To provide comparable data in the analysis stage.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5. Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading:

		(Bernoff, 2009; Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020).
IF YES: What kinds of sponsored material have you included on your blog? Please tick all that apply: Paid Display Advertisements Branded Sponsored Posts Affiliate Adverts Other …	To gather data on the range of types of sponsored material and advertising that fashion bloggers have posted.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5. Theme: Relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Jin and Villegas, 2009; Ma and Chan, 2014; Cane 2017; Stubb and Colliander, 2019).
IF YES: What is the most common type of sponsored material on your blog, and why do you think this is?	To provide comparable data for the analysis stage.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5. Theme: Attitudes to sponsorship. Reading: (Jin and Villegas, 2009; Ma and Chan, 2014; Feng, 2016; Cane 2017; Khuong, 2017; Wellman *et al*, 2020).
Section Five: **This section is about including sponsored material on your blog.**		
When you were first offered sponsorship/compensation by a commercial source, what was your initial response?	To explore respondent reactions to sponsorship offers.	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Attitudes to sponsorship. Reading: (Ekdale *et al*, 2010; Mutum, 2011; Borah 2015; Faleatua, 2018; Cheung, Vazquez and Conway, 2019).
When you first accepted sponsorship compensation,	To identify key reasons for accepting sponsorship.	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ5.

what was your ONE main reason for doing this?		Theme: Relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Abidin, 2016; Eisend *et al*, 2020).
Approximately what percentage of your blog content is sponsored? Give options 1-100.	To measure the extent of their interaction with commercial sponsors.	RQ1, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Blog credibility. Reading: (Marwick, 2013; Shiah, 2014; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Neal, 2017; Abidin and Ots, 2017).
If you have received sponsorship, have you ever experienced mixed feelings about including this material on your blog? Please explain your answer.	To provide opportunity for respondents to elaborate on their feelings about this aspect of their practice.	RQ1, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Blog credibility. Reading: (Hansson, 2015; Hu, 2015; Manikonda *et al*, 2015; Neal, 2017; Kim *et al*, 2020).
If you are asked to promote/include sponsored content that you do NOT like, have you ever returned the product to the sponsor?	To explore the possibility of ethical conflict in bloggers between the attractions of sponsorship and the aspirations for their output.	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Themes: Blog credibility and relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Sedeke, 2012; Jablonska *et al*, 2017; Lee and Kim, 2020).
If you have included material/product that you did NOT like, were you honestly critical of it?	To explore the ethical standards of fashion bloggers involved in posting commercial material.	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Blog credibility. Reading: (Mutum, 2011; Sedeke, 2012; Manikonda

		et al, 2015; Jablonska *et al*, 2017; Esteban-Santos *et al,* 2018).
Have you ever experienced any pressure from a brand to provide content on your blog?	To provide comparable data for the analysis stage.	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Pihl, 2013; Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Borah, 2015; Wellman *et al*, 2020).
Have you ever felt that your blog writing style or own opinion may have been affected by receiving sponsorship?	To explore the extent to which bloggers feel pressurised and/or constrained by sponsors.	RQ2, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Pihl, 2013; Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Borah, 2015; Wellman *et al*, 2020).
Have you ever felt like sponsorship was an obligation?	To encourage further comment on the issues stimulated by previous questions.	RQ4. Theme: Relationship with sponsors. Reading: (Pihl, 2013; Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Borah, 2015; Wellman *et al*, 2020).
When an item has been sponsored, do you disclose this to your blog readers? Always Usually	To collect information about the extent to which they have given thought to the question of transparency and felt a	RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Blog credibility. Reading:

| Seldom
Never	need to be honest with readership.	(Ohanian, 1990; Fogg *et al*, 2001; Metzger, 2007; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Shiau, 2014; Cheng and Ho, 2015; Neal, 2017; Abidin and Ots, 2017).
What advice, if any, would you give an advertiser who wants to advertise on your blog?	To measure the extent to which bloggers feel able to negotiate with sponsors.	RQ5, RQ6.

Theme: Relationship with sponsors.

Reading: (Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Carah and Shaul, 2016; Glucksman, 2017). |
| **Section Six:
This section is about your general feelings about sponsored material in fashion blogs overall.** | | |
| What is your view towards sponsored content on fashion blogs in general? | To provide an overall impression of the respondent's view of developments in the fashion blog sector. | RQ5, RQ6.

Theme: Attitude to sponsorship

Reading: (Jin and Villegas, 2009; Ma and Chan, 2014; Feng, 2016; Cane 2017; Khuong, 2017; Childers, Lemon and Hoy, 2019). |
| How often do you buy products recommended by other fashion bloggers? | To measure the potential impact of sponsored material on respondents who have significant expertise in reading and using fashion blogs. | RQ3, RQ5, RQ6.

Theme: Impact of sponsorship.

Reading: (Marwick, 2013; Hansson, 2015; Hwang and Jeong, 2016). |
| How much do you think the inclusion of sponsored material affects the credibility of fashion | To gauge the extent to which bloggers feel that their own followers are influenced by advertising. | RQ5, RQ6.

Theme: Relationship with readers. |

bloggers in the eyes of readers?		Reading: (Campbell and Wright, 2008; Sedeke, 2012; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Klein, Ahlf and Sharma, 2014; Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget, 2020).
What overall impact, if any, do you think a decline in blogger credibility will have on the blogosphere?	To provide an opportunity for bloggers to reflect on whether their individual actions have wider repercussions on the fashion blog sector and blogosphere overall.	RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Impact of sponsorship. Reading: (Marwick, 2013; Hansson, 2015; Hwang and Jeong, 2016).
Section Seven: This section is about your feelings about the way your followers/readers respond to sponsored content.		
How do you think your blog readers feel towards sponsored content on YOUR blog?	To provide an opportunity for bloggers to comment on their perceptions of the impact of their actions and decisions on their followers.	RQ3, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Relationship with readers. Reading: (Campbell and Wright, 2008; Sedeke, 2012; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Klein, Ahlf and Sharma, 2014; Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget, 2020).
Have you ever received negative comments from readers, or experienced anything negative through sponsored content?	To provide an opportunity for bloggers to offer information about feedback received from their followers	RQ3, RQ4, RQ5. Theme: Relationship with readers. Reading: (Campbell and Wright, 2008; Sedeke, 2012; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Klein, Ahlf and

		Sharma, 2014; Koivisto, 2019).
What advice, if any, would you give a fellow blogger who is considering accepting sponsorship/ advertising on their blog?	To provide an opportunity for confirming the extent to which bloggers view the acceptance of advertising in a positive or negative manner.	RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Attitude to sponsorship. Reading: (Pihl, 2013; Lu, Chang and Chang, 2014; Haley *et al*, 2014; Abidin, 2016).
If you have any other comments to make about the subject of sponsored content in fashion blogs and its impact on blog credibility, please comment:	To provide an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on key issues that have emerged during the completion of the questionnaire.	RQ5, RQ6. Theme: Blog credibility. Reading: (Ohanian, 1990; Fogg *et al*, 2001; Metzger, 2007; Hahn and Lee, 2014; Shiau, 2014; Cheng and Ho, 2015; Neal, 2017; Abidin and Ots, 2017).

3.4.8 Online questionnaire analysis

Before the second phase of the research could commence, the responses from the online questionnaire were analysed in a thematic, inductive manner using NVivo11 technology to identify and discover new themes and questions that emerged from the questionnaire data, which could then be probed in more depth in the second interview phase. Greater discussion of this analytical process can be found at section 3.5.6.

The online questionnaire was accessible for three months in order to collect sufficient responses from 1st June 2019 to 1st September 2019. In total, there were 307 valid responses from the online questionnaire, again helping to confirm the validity of the data-collection method. Participant breakdown was as follows:

- Active Young Bloggers = **214**

- Active Older Bloggers = **61**

- Inactive Bloggers = **32**

Responses collected from both questionnaires (active and inactive) were analysed and a number of new, unexpected, themes emerged which helped to form the basis and development of questions for the interview stage. Figure 3.7 below illustrates the themes that emerged from the Active Blogger Questionnaire.

Figure 3.7 Active Bloggers: new themes from questionnaire
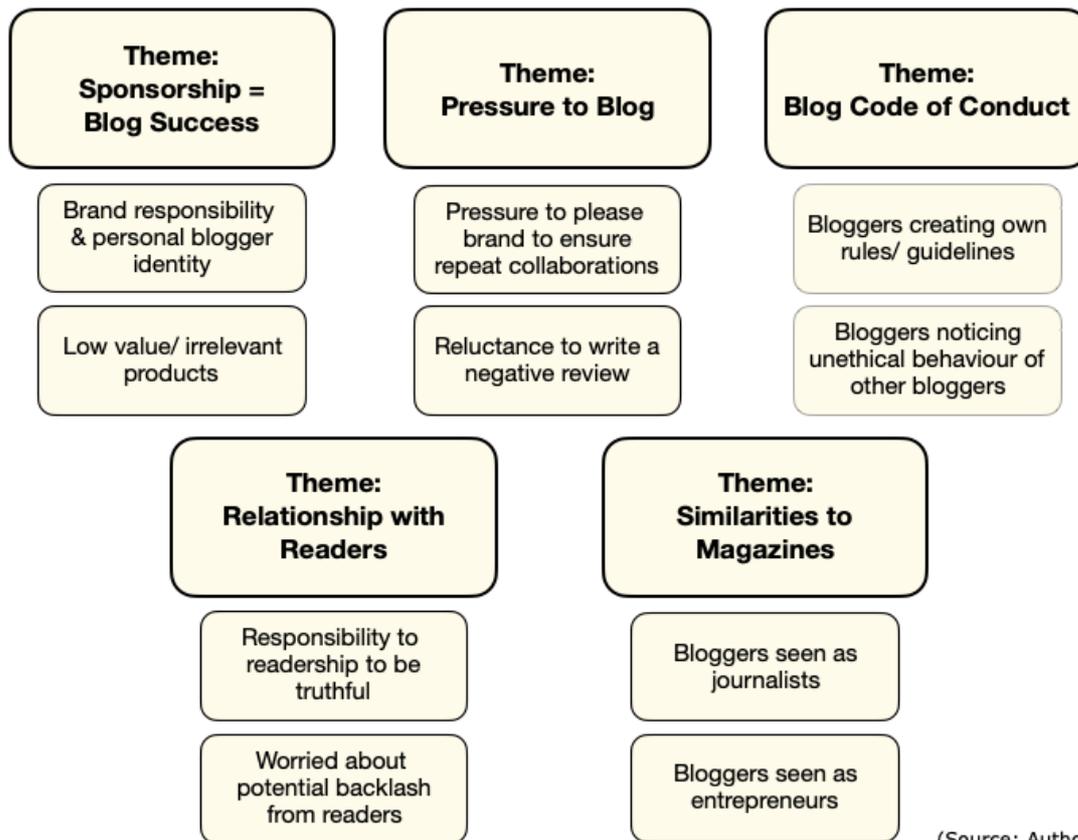
(Source: Author, 2020).

These themes are discussed in more depth within the research-analysis chapter of this study. From these themes found in the online questionnaire, a series of further questions were formulated to investigate during the interview stage. These questions were designed in a semi-structured nature to encourage deeper discussion from research participants.

Table 3.3 Active Bloggers: interview question formulation

New Theme	Active Blogger Interview Questions	Relates to Research Questions and/ or Key Themes and Literature
Sponsorship = Blog Success	Many bloggers feel that working with brands in a commercialised way is an indication of their success as a blogger. Do you agree that this is a valid way of measuring blogger success or not? To what extent do you measure your own success as a blogger in terms of working with brands? Many bloggers feel that an important factor in blog success is that blog and product are well-matched. Do you feel that the responsibility for a good match lies more with the brand or the blogger? Have you refused to feature a product that was not suitable for your blog? If so, can you explain why you took this decision? If you have never refused to feature a product, can you explain why you have made this decision?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Reading: (Roy and Pansari, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Koivisto, 2019; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020; Lee and Kim, 2020.
Pressure to Blog	Many bloggers have indicated that they feel various pressures when collaborating with brands. Many have also indicated that they feel reluctant to post a negative product review. To what extent have you felt pressure to please a brand? To what extent have you felt pressure when posting a negative review? Can you give examples of instances when you have felt pressures of this kind, and why you felt this way?	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 Reading: (Hall, 2017; Riboni, 2017; Safitri, 2017; Mutum *et al*, 2018; Rocamora, 2018; Hanusch, Banjac and Maares, 2019; Whitmer, 2020).
Blog Code of Conduct	Many bloggers have indicated that they take care to follow a set of personal rules or guidelines when posting sponsored content, but have also suggested that not all bloggers seem to do so. Have you created your own rules or guidelines that you follow when you are working with brands? If yes, can you explain what these rules are? How does using these guidelines affect the way you feel about your own sponsored content? If no, have you considered adopting guidelines when featuring sponsored content? If so, what might they be?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5 Reading: (Williams and Hodges, 2016; Evans *et al*, 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Vierman and Hudders, 2020; Wellman *et al*, 2020:).

	Are you aware of any behaviour in the output of other bloggers that you consider unethical? If so, what kinds of behaviour do you consider to be unethical?	
Relationship with Readers	Many bloggers claim to feel a sense of responsibility to their readership when featuring commercial products. To what extent do you feel a responsibility to your readership in this way? Can you give examples of situations where you have felt influenced by this sense of responsibility when creating blog material? Many bloggers claim that the blogosphere is a generally positive, supporting community within the internet, as compared with other social media. To what extent do you feel that is a valid comment in your experience? Can you provide examples of situations which have led you to take this view?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5 Reading: (Al-Saleh, 2017; Arrieta, Pena and Medina, 2019; Gunawan and Iskandar, 2020; Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget, 2020:).
Similarities to Magazines	A number of bloggers have made comparisons between fashion blogs and traditional fashion magazines. Do you feel that there are similarities between fashion blogs and traditional magazines? If so, what elements do you think are similar? A number of bloggers increasingly view themselves as (semi) professional fashion journalists and/or fashion entrepreneurs. Do you feel that this is a valid comment on the way that blogging has developed over recent years? If so, what features of current blogging do you think have developed in this way? To what extent do you view yourself as a fashion journalist or fashion entrepreneur? To what extent has your own experience and expertise as a blogger been affected by the trend towards a more professionalised approach?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5 Reading: (Ferreira and Vasconcelos, 2017' Panchal and Cassidy, 2018; Mole, 2019; Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020; Whitmer, 2020).

Figure 3.8 below illustrates the themes that emerged from the Inactive Blogger Questionnaire.

Figure 3.8 Inactive Blogger: new themes from questionnaire

Theme: Sponsorship = Blog Success	Theme: Pressure to Blog	Theme: Relationship with Readers	Theme: Discussion of Other Media
Perceived as success	Pressure from brands	Responsibility to readership	Comparisons to fashion magazines
Blogging has become oversaturated activity	Professionalism of blogs	Worried about potential backlash from readers	Uptake of other social media channels
	Impact on mental health		

(Source: Author, 2020).

These themes are discussed in more depth within the research-analysis chapter of this study. From these themes found in the online questionnaire, a series of further questions were formulated to investigate during the interview stage. These questions were designed in a semi-structured nature to encourage deeper discussion from research participants.

Table 3.4 Inactive Bloggers: interview question formulation

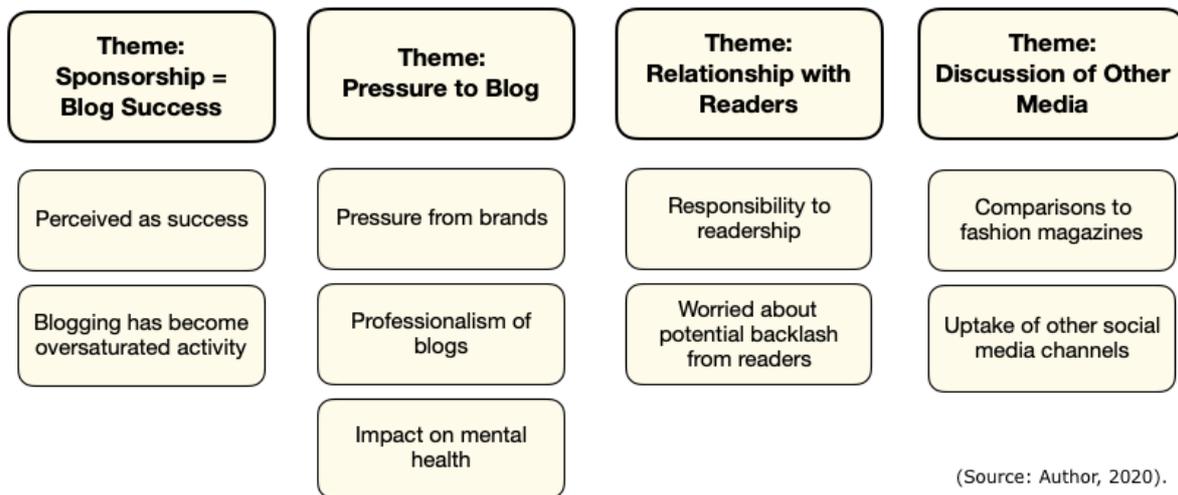| New Theme	Inactive Blogger Interview Questions	Relates to Research Questions and/ or Key Themes and Literature
Sponsorship = Blog Success	Many former bloggers have indicated that they felt that working with brands in a commercialised way was an indication of their success as a blogger. Do you agree that this is a valid way of measuring blogger success or not? To what extent did you measure your own success as a blogger in terms of working with brands? Many bloggers felt that an important factor in blog success was that blog and product should be well-matched. Do you feel that the responsibility of ensuring a good match lies more with the brand or the blogger? Did you ever refuse to feature a product that was not suitable for your blog? If so, can you explain why you took this decision? If you were always willing to feature commercial products, can you explain the reasons why you took this position?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5, RQ6. Reading: (Roy and Pansari, 2014; Montecchi and Nobbs, 2017; Koivisto, 2019; Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz, 2020; Lee and Kim, 2020.
Pressure to Blog	Many former bloggers have indicated that they could feel various pressures when working with brands, with a number of them indicating that they felt reluctant to post a negative product review. To what extent did you feel pressure to meet the expectations of a brand sponsor? To what extent did you feel pressure when posting negative reviews? Many bloggers have also indicated that the increasingly competitive nature and professionalism of blogs has also created pressure. Can you give examples of instances when you have felt pressures of this kind, and elaborate on why you felt this way? To what extent was your own experience and expertise as a blogger affected by the trend towards a more professionalised approach? Can you provide evidence of instances when this was the case? Many former bloggers have indicated that the pressures of blogging had an impact on their mental health. To what extent do you identify with this statement? Can you provide evidence of instances when this was the case?	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 Reading: (Hall, 2017; Riboni, 2017; Safitri, 2017; Mutum *et al*, 2018; Rocamora, 2018; Hanusch, Banjac and Maares, 2019; Whitmer, 2020).
Relationship with Readers	Many former bloggers claim to have felt a sense of responsibility to their readership when featuring commercial products. To what extent did you feel a responsibility to your readership in this way? Can you give examples of situations when you felt influenced by this sense of responsibility when creating blog material? What factors do you think influenced your attitude towards this aspect of blogging?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ5 Reading: (Al-Saleh, 2017; Arrieta, Pena and Medina, 2019; Gunawan and Iskandar, 2020; Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget, 2020).

	Many former bloggers claim that the early blogosphere was a generally positive, supporting community within the internet, as compared with other social media. To what extent do you feel that is a valid comment in your experience? Can you provide examples of situations which led you to take this view?	
Discussion of Other Media	A number of bloggers have made comparisons between fashion blogs and traditional fashion magazines. Do you feel that there are similarities between fashion blogs and traditional magazines? If so, what elements of blogs and magazines do you think are similar? A number of bloggers increasingly view themselves as (semi) professional fashion journalists and/or fashion entrepreneurs. Do you feel that this is a valid comment on the way that blogging has developed over recent years? If so, what features of current blogging do you think have developed in this way? To what extent did you view yourself as a fashion journalist or fashion entrepreneur when you were an active blogger? Many former bloggers have commented on the decline of blogging and the shift to other channels such as Instagram. To what extent were these factors behind your decision to stop blogging? What other factors influenced you to stopped blogging?	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, RQ5 Reading: (Ferreira and Vasconcelos, 2017' Panchal and Cassidy, 2018; Mole, 2019; Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020; Whitmer, 2020).

3.5 Second phase of research: interviews

3.5.1 In-Depth interviews

Although considered to be time consuming and resource intensive, qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews allow researchers to work directly with participants and further investigate their responses to certain questions. Interviews encourage participants to elaborate on their responses, thus generating richer data about their beliefs, experiences and perceptions of the phenomena being researched (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). In-depth interviews can serve a number of different research scenarios, being useful as a stand-alone method providing the basis for a complete study, or can be combined with other methods such as online questionnaires in order to further confirm and enhance the questionnaire research findings, as in this study. Interview participants need to be carefully selected to ensure they have all experienced the phenomena under examination (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

In order to maintain consistency and validity, research participants who took part in the online questionnaire were invited to participate in the interview stage of the research. The aim of the interview process was to encourage the participants to provide further, extended commentary on the issues in the questionnaire, and also permit new material to arise. The interview sub-questions were designed with a view to confirming, extending and deepening specific findings drawn from the online questionnaire. It was important to be aware of the way in which the discussion and exchange of information can develop, as this can influence the quantity and nature of data collected (Waller *et al*, 2015).

A further benefit of conducting in-depth interviews is that they allow the researcher to gauge the validity of the questions being asked, assess participant awareness of the key issues under consideration, and reflect on the general credibility of the research method and design (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2018). This multi-method approach based on online questionnaires and in-depth interviews can stimulate participant involvement and generate comment on the research topic, allowing the researcher to gain adequate material to analyse and interpret the bloggers' opinions.

3.5.2 Telephone interviews

In order to accommodate the geographical locations of fashion bloggers across the UK, all of the in-depth interviews were conducted by telephone. This approach was identified by the bloggers as their preferred mode of communication. It also allowed the researcher to contact a wide group of bloggers who had taken part in the online questionnaire. A general critique of interviewing as a research tool is given below:

Table 3.5 Main advantages and disadvantages of interviews

Advantages	*Disadvantages*
● **Personal contact** – this method can allow for personal contact between the interviewer and the respondent.	● **Quality of data by interviewer** – the quality of gathered data may often reflect the experience of the interviewer and their ability to collect information from the research respondent.
● **In-depth information and ability to probe** – this method can allow a researcher to gain in-depth information on a topic, and probe to encourage further response from a particular question.	● **Personal bias** – the interviewer may have own personal bias towards the specific research topic, and this may impact upon the way in which they input responses.
● **Qualitative approach** – this can allow for the identification of human thoughts and feelings, which can be hard to monitor through quantitative methods. This method can also allow the interviewer to capture emotions and behaviours of the research participant.	● **Time consuming** – collecting, transcribing and analysing interview data can take a lengthy period. Other elements such as scheduling, organising, planning and conducting an interview are also time expensive.
● **Enhanced respondent openness** – taking part in a relaxed, informal interview can encourage a more open response from participants and help to reveal attitudes that may not have been voiced during other research methods, such as a questionnaire or focus group.	● **Unique differences** – it can be difficult to compare the results of in-depth interviews because each interview event is unique e.g. differing environments, atmospheres and human factors can lead to inconsistencies.
● **Question flexibility** – the interviewer can adjust questions and change the direction of the discussion as the interview develops e.g. change question style depending on research respondent.	● **Expensive** – interviews are seen to be relatively expensive due to the amount of time required to collect, organise and analyse data.

(Source: Author, 2020, adapted from Bryman, 2015: Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010: Corbin and Strauss, 2015: Cresswell and Creswell, 2018).

3.5.3 Pilot interview

A number of pilot interviews [five] were conducted to help confirm the viability of the chosen method. This proved to be a useful process as it helped to gauge participant response and understanding, suitability of question sequence and average interview duration.

3.5.4 Interview participants

Of the 307 participants that took part in the online questionnaire, 28 individuals volunteered to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted until saturation point for was reached for each group. Participant breakdown was as follows:

Table 3.6 Active Young Blogger (AYB) Participant Breakdown

Participant #	Age	Date of Blog
AYB 1	23	2014
AYB 2	24	2014
AYB 3	24	2013
AYB 4	25	2012
AYB 5	25	2014
AYB 6	25	2015
AYB 7	26	2011
AYB 8	26	2010
AYB 9	27	2016
AYB 10	27	2012
AYB 11	28	2015
AYB 12	28	2009

Table 3.7 Active Older Blogger (AOB) Participant Breakdown

Participant #	Age	Date of Blog
AOB 1	50	2012
AOB 2	50	2011
AOB 3	51	2013
AOB 4	53	2015
AOB 5	56	2017
AOB 6	57	2012
AOB 7	64	2008
AOB 8	65	2011
AOB 9	68	2017

Table 3.8 Inactive Blogger (IB) Participant Breakdown

Participant #	Age	Date of Blog	Date Stopped Blogging
IB 1	25	2013	2018
IB 2	26	2012	2019
IB 3	26	2013	2018
IB 4	27	2010	2017
IB 5	28	2014	2019
IB 6	28	2011	2016
IB 7	28	2012	2019

Full analysis and discussion of the findings from both the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews is discussed in chapter four.

3.5.5 Limitations to the selected methods

In many research studies, the methods adopted can impose limitations upon the data collected and it is therefore necessary to assess the effectiveness of the selected approach. A common failing of questionnaires is that they can be over-long and can therefore run the risk of alienating respondents who find them time-consuming and off-putting (Bryman, 2015). Such participants may switch off and begin to respond with more limited, sparse answers. In this study, which was based upon an extensive questionnaire of almost forty questions, this was clearly a concern, and there were a number of respondents [eleven] that did seem to get overwhelmed by the number of questions.

For example, there was evidence to suggest this small number of respondents may have lost some degree of interest in the latter part of the questionnaire, with responses to later questions becoming shorter, less detailed and/or offering evidence of repetition. In a very small number, responses to later questions were so short as to be unhelpful and, at points, incoherent.

As a result of the uneven and/or incomplete level of responses from these eleven participants, their answers were discarded and therefore not included in the analytical phase. However, countering this was the fact that all the questionnaire respondents were volunteers, under no obligation to participate in the study, and had expressed a clear interest in the area under consideration. As suggested by the results from the online questionnaire [307 valid responses], the research topic was of significant interest to the respondents and the chosen method can be deemed to have been effective at collecting relevant data.

As regards the specific limitations of individual interviews by telephone, this method can often be problematic for a number of reasons: it can be difficult to ensure consistency of interviewer and interviewee experience; multiple interviews held at separate times and locations can produce a very wide range of differing types of response that can be difficult to analyse; it can be difficult to observe and take account of respondent behaviour and body language (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite these acknowledged difficulties, this was the participants' preferred mode of communication as well as offering the advantage of convenience for the researcher (Gibbs, 2018). The method also allowed for a higher degree of anonymity which could help to prevent further researcher bias. It may also result in participants' offering more open responses to questions, as there is no immediate personal distraction, such as eye contact (Gunn and Faire, 2016). This secondary method proved to be effective with 28 valid responses collected, which again highlighted respondent interest in the topic and the overall effectiveness of data collection.

3.6 Data Analysis: grounded theory and thematic analysis

Qualitative data from participant interaction can be complex to organise and analyse (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). For this particular study, the analytical process utilised a grounded theory, inductive, thematic approach, where the researcher was looking for recurring patterns and repeated themes to emerge from the respondent data.

Grounded theory is a systematic methodology in the social sciences that involves the construction of theories through methodical gathering and analysis of data. This form of research methodology uses inductive reasoning, with research likely to begin with a question and/or the collection of qualitative data (Urquhart, 2012; Guetterman *et al*, 2019). As researchers review the data collected, repeated ideas, themes, concepts and/or elements may become apparent and are tagged with codes, which have been extracted from the data. As more data is collected, and reviewed, codes can be grouped into concepts, and then into categories (Charmaz, 2014). These categories may become the basis for new theory.

This approach is heavily based upon thematic analysis, one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach and is therefore effective when collecting data of a generally subjective nature (Ritchie *et al*, 2013; Sommer, 2020). Another strength is that it can allow the researcher to compare data sets, and highlight similarities or differences that may emerge. It therefore seems a valid approach for this study, as it helps the researcher to investigate participant reaction to certain phenomena, and provides

opportunities for understanding relevant issues more deeply and for adding insight into the bloggers' own interpretations.

● Questionnaire Analysis

Questionnaire responses were collected using Google Forms which automatically populated data into an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed the researcher to manually analyse the data in a grounded theory, open, inductive manner, through which research themes were categorised and coded. NVivo11 software was also utilised which offered further assistance when organising the data, assigning codes and assorting into relevant themes. Once the data had been ordered and analysed, a number of new themes and areas for further exploration were identified. These included: sponsorship being recognised as a positive factor when measuring blog success, identification of various pressures that individuals can experience when blogging, awareness of blogging sponsorship guidelines, heightened sense of responsibility to readership, similarities to magazines.

At this stage in the analysis, the researcher reviewed existing literature in relation to the new themes. This helped to highlight a number of studies that have examined similar areas within the general blogosphere, including Panchal and Cassidy (2018), Banjac and Maares (2019), Arrieta, Pena and Medina (2019), Mole (2019), Koivisto (2019), Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020), Lee and Kim (2020) and Whitmer (2020). This analysis and further reading helped to provide a rationale for the formulation of interview questions. This is shown in Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

● Interview Analysis

The in-depth interviews were then recorded, transcribed and analysed in an identical manner to the online questionnaire. Following an inductive, thematic process, the researcher adopted manual analysis first, before utilising NVivo11 software to categorise the data, apply codes and identify new themes and findings.

Storing the data online in this way helped the researcher to quickly identify similarities and differences amongst the participant groups across factors such as age, changing motivations towards commercial reward, professional and personal

pressure, attitude to the growing commercialisation of blogging, sense of community and participant response to different forms of fashion media. This approach also helped the researcher search and retrieve participant information and comment across the relevant themes. The researcher was also able to compare data collected from the interviews with the already stored and organised data from the questionnaires. This helped to further strengthen the creation of themes and organisation and retrieval of participant quotes, ultimately helping to shape the analysis chapter in coherent manner.

Once interview data was collected and stored accurately in NVivo11, the researcher was also able to examine relevant readings to include throughout the analysis chapter. This was useful when helping to address the research questions at the end of each theme in the findings chapter. It also helped to identify areas where the research findings offered similarities to themes in existing studies e.g. changing motivations within blogging and the professionalism of the sector (Rocamora 2018; McFarlane and Samsioe 2020), the view of sponsorship as a positive development (Fischer, 2018), the perceived increased similarity between blogs and magazines (Ferreira and Vasconcelos 2017; Lee et al 2017). It also helped to identify differences with existing studies and new areas of knowledge: blogger unwillingness to be negative and/or adopt self-censorship which contrasts with Klein, Ahlf and Sharma (2015) and Koivisto (2019): the perceived decline of positive blogger community values contrasting with Lungeanu and Parisi (2017) and Lockie (2019): the negative impact of the blogging experience upon mental health contrasting with Peek *et al* (2015), Callahan *et al* (2018) and Limatius (2019).

Figure 3.9 below illustrates a six-step thematic analysis process, created by Braun and Clarke (2006). These stages can be used when conducting, inductive thematic data gathering and analysis.

Figure 3.9 Six step thematic analysis process

Phase One: Familiarising oneself with the data	This step can involve: transcribing data; reading and re-reading; noting down initial codes.
Phase Two: Creation of initial codes and categories	This step can involve: coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the data-set; collating data relevant to each code.
Phase Three: Searching for themes	This step can involve: collating codes into potential themes; gathering all data relevant to each potential themes.
Phase Four: Reviewing themes	This step can involve: checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data-set; generating a thematic 'map'.
Phase Five: Defining and naming themes	This step can involve: ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme; generation of clear names for each theme.
Phase Six: Producing the report	This step can involve: final opportunity for analysis selecting appropriate extracts; discussion of the analysis; relate back to research question and/or literature; produce report.

(Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Naturally, there are some limitations when adopting an inductive, thematic approach for data analysis. A concern amongst some academics can be the trustworthiness of the approach, as it can rely on human, subjective interpretation (King, 2004). Nevertheless, many researchers agree that rigorous thematic analysis can produce trustworthy, insightful and accurate findings, and it is a flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many differing studies (Braun and Clarke, 2006: Nowell *et al*, 2017). It is particularly useful for this specific study, which has examined the perspectives of different research

participants, and has helped to highlight similarities and differences, and generate unanticipated insights.

3.6.1 NVivo11 software

As indicated previously, NVivo11 software was used in order to aid with the thematic approach. The software was utilised as an electronic method for interacting with the data and offered assistance when assigning codes to participant responses and identifying difference between the specific data sets. This technology was useful when applying and managing codes and organising these into relevant themes and sub themes.

The researcher was able to compare the data collected from all three participant groups and search for similarities and differences. NVivo11 allowed the researcher to create a series of code books, comparison diagrams and columns, and visual mind maps. This approach allowed differences within the groups to stand out and helped to find, compare and organise similar and different participant attitudes towards emerging issues in a coherent way. For example, motivation to blog was a clear repeating theme, and could be broken down into sub-headings such as personal hobby, potential income and/or career aspirations. NVivo11 therefore helped the researcher to categorise/collate material within a bank of participant quotes under separate headings for each participant group. It made it easier to carry out more complex searches to retrieve connected information such as key words and phrases across the themes and sub themes. In addition, it allowed the researcher to code the questionnaire data excel sheet alongside interview transcripts, import relevant journal articles which helped stimulate comparison of the participant data with ideas drawn from readings (Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon, 2012).

It is important to note however that NVivo11 is not designed to undertake analysis, and was only used as an electronic manual means of coding the questionnaire and interview data, where codes and themes were electronically stored and could be easily retrieved (Bazeley and Jackson, 2019). This means that the research codes could be structured more logically, thus helping to shape the

writing-up of the research findings (Larkin and Thompson, 2012; Dollah, Adbuh and Rosmaladewi, 2017).

Using software such as NVivo11 can help to ensure a more rigorous analysis of the data, however a combination of both electronic and paper-based techniques is advised when carrying out qualitative research (Woolf and Silver, 2017), and was therefore adopted for this study.

3.7 Ethical overview

Consideration of ethical issues should be integrated throughout all phases of the research process, allowing researchers to feel confident that the research process is fair to all participants involved (Bryman, 2015). Researchers bear a moral responsibility as regards the personal rights and privacy of participants whose confidentiality must be respected at all times. Researchers should also be aware of their responsibility to secure informed consent from all study participants and ensure that the collected data is properly used (Silverman, 2015: Dawson, 2019). In this study, all subjects were provided with an initial overview of the project's objectives to help them decide whether or not they wished to participate. This overview provided them with assurance about the guiding ethical principles such as anonymity and confidentiality, explained the way in which data was to be recorded and used, how the information was stored and the procedure for secure storage of information once it was transcribed. All participants were asked to complete a consent declaration and full attention was paid to respecting their personal rights and privacy. These procedures are a fundamental aspect of the informed consent process but can also help to increase the likelihood of candid responses (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

All research activity in this study was undertaken in accordance with the Robert Gordon University SPER ethical research guidelines. This ensured that all relevant ethical issues were considered throughout the planning of the research process, informed consent was obtained from the research participants, and that all collected data was gathered, used and stored in a responsible and confidential

manner. Participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form and full attention was given to respecting their personal rights and privacy.

Table 3.9 considers further ethical considerations for the research:

Robert Gordon University Requirements	This research adheres to the ethical guidelines from RGU's research governance and ethics policies.
Student Project Ethical Review (SPER form)	The researcher has completed a SPER form as required by the Robert Gordon University. This identifies any potential harm to the research participants or researcher.
Appropriate Information Gathering	Information and sources collected throughout the secondary research phase have been appropriately referenced to ensure that all original authors' gain recognition and acknowledgement for their work.
Information Storage and Processing	The collected research data was processed accurately and has been stored securely in line with Data Protection Act (1998) regulation.
Informed Participant Consent	Informed consent was provided and required for both the online questionnaire and the in-depth interviews. All research participants were volunteers and were clearly made aware of the purpose of the research study. Interviewees were also asked if they gave permission for the interviews to be recorded for transcription purposes.
Confidentiality	Anonymity was automatic for both questionnaire responses and interview participants. All respondents will be anonymous throughout the analysis chapter.

(Source: Author, adapted from Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2012, Clough and Nutbrown 2013, Silverman 2015 and Bryman 2015).

3.8 Chapter summary

Chapter 3 has addressed the research philosophy and methodology adopted in this study. It has discussed several research approaches which are available to the researcher in this field, and it has justified the selected research methodology and method, suitable for an interpretative, qualitative research study of this kind. Throughout the chapter, consideration has been given to fundamental approaches underpinning research in the social sciences, and to possible perspectives in terms of research philosophy and epistemology that can illuminate the investigative process. A rationale has been provided for the choice of research approach and for the adoption of a sequential, multi-method design model, in the form of interpretivist, qualitative online questionnaires and in-depth interviews.

This study will now focus on the analysis and discussion of the research findings.

Chapter Four:

Research Findings and Analysis

Chapter Four: Research Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction to chapter

The following chapter presents the key findings drawn from the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. As indicated in the previous methodology chapter, a number of themes were identified through a process of thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo11 software. As a result of this analysis, six main themes were identified, and these are discussed in relation to literature throughout the chapter.

Table 4.1 Key themes that emerged from research participant data

Theme:	Areas of discussion within theme:
Motivations to Blog	Initial blog motivations; changes in blog motivation; long-term goal for blog.
Sponsorship on Blogs	Reaction to sponsorship; reasons for accepting sponsorship; mixed feelings about accepting sponsorship; honesty and sponsorship; reluctance to post negative reviews; impact of sponsorship on writing style; refusal to accept sponsorship.
Pressure	Professional standards; bloggers' advice to brands; personal pressure relating to others within the blogosphere; impact on mental health; Inactive bloggers and their reasons to discontinue blogging; impact of increased pressure on blogging community.
Blog Code of Conduct	Blog sponsorship rules and regulations; disclosure of sponsorship; unethical behaviour of others.
Relationship with Readers	Responsibility towards readership; negative comments from readers; reader reaction to sponsored content.
Similarities to Magazines	Similarities between blogs and fashion magazines; fashion journalists.

Each theme is discussed in turn, supported by participant quotes and pie charts. In addition, findings are linked to relevant literature, which examines the general blogosphere although some points are drawn from studies specifically investigating the development of fashion blogging. At the end of each theme the research questions are considered and discussed.

Due to the high number of participants that took part in this study [307], the researcher was able to collect an abundance of participant quotes. The quotes that have been used throughout this chapter were selected from both the online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. They were chosen because they were particularly relevant and significant in terms of the chapter themes, best typified the comments made by other participants on each issue and best helped to illustrate participants' thoughts and arguments.

In order to distinguish between the three different respondent groups and participant quotes, the following colour scheme has been adopted:

• Active Younger Bloggers – **Pink**

• Active Older Bloggers – **Green**

• Inactive Bloggers – **Blue**

In order to meet the requirements of objective five, in many places additional participant demographic information has been included, particularly age, to help highlight differences and/or similarities between the research respondents. Within each theme, a number of diagrammatical pie charts have also been included to illustrate the findings from each group.

4.2 Participant responses to question sections 1 and 2

The first two sections of the questionnaire were designed to gather general information about the research participants and their fashion-blogging experience. The initial questions collected quantitative information about the respondents' ages, size of blog following, frequency of blog output and length of blogging experience. Several additional questions were asked in order to gain information about the respondents' overall interest in, and awareness, of the fashion-blogging sector, and their general view on the features that contribute to effective, successful blogs. The results were organised for each separate blogger group in diagrammatic form and are included below.

● **Participant age**

The age of members of the Active Younger group ranged from 18 to 29 years. The age of Active Older participants spanned 50 to 70 years. Approximately 67% of this second group were in the 50 to 60 age group. All members of the Inactive Blogger group were similar in age to the Younger Bloggers, being aged between 20 and 28. The most common ages in these two groups were 26 and 27.

● **Length of experience**

Participants were asked to indicate the year in which they began fashion blogging. For all three groups, the earliest date was either 2008 or 2009. In all three groups, the largest annual number of new bloggers took up the activity during the period 2013-2014.

The data indicates that 198 of the 214 Active Younger bloggers commenced blogging between 2008 and the end of 2017. Therefore, 92% of the group had at least two years' experience prior to answering the questionnaire.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

The data indicates that 54 of the 61 Active Older Bloggers commenced blogging between 2008 and the end of 2017. Therefore, 88% of the group had at least two years' experience prior to answering the questionnaire.

All 32 participants in the Inactive Blogger group had commenced blogging by 2015. 81% of this group were still blogging during the years 2017-2019 and therefore had at least two years' experience prior to answering the questionnaire.

● Size of following

All 307 participants in the study had relatively small-scale followings with a count number under 10,000. None were remotely close to being described as 'macro bloggers', a term quantified by Campbell and Farrell (2020) as a blogger regularly attracting large followings in excess of 100,000. Nevertheless, there was significant variance within the group.

Some participants had particularly small followings of fewer than 100 regular readers. In the Active Younger and Inactive blogger groups, 9% had fewer that this number. By contrast, 18% of Active Older bloggers had followings in this low range. In the Active Younger blogger group, 54% had followings of between 1000 and 5000. A similar percentage [62%] of Active Older bloggers had followings of this size. The number of Inactive Bloggers within this bracket was significantly lower [44%].

At the other end of the scale, the number of Active Younger and Active Older bloggers with followers ranging from 5000 to 10,000+ was similar, with both at approximately 10% and 8% respectively. The number of Inactive Bloggers with followings between 5000 and 10,000 was slightly larger at approximately 12% although there were no 10000+ followings recorded by this group. These findings are illustrated in diagrammatic form below on pages 138-140.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

● General interest in fashion blogs

Participants were asked three questions designed to help measure the extent of their commitment to maintaining their own blog as well as gauging their general interest in fashion blogging.

The first question asked about their frequency of posting blog material. A larger number of Active Younger bloggers posted material on a daily basis [25%] in comparison to members of the other two groups [both 16%]. The combined figure for bloggers who preferred to post on either a daily or weekly basis was high in the Active Younger [78%] and Active Older [78%] groups. The highest figure was recorded by the Inactive blogger group [94%] who indicated that they had also preferred to post on a daily or weekly basis. These high levels of blog activity provide evidence that many of the study participants are deeply interested and highly motivated by blogging.

The second question was designed to find out if study participants were interested in the output of other fashion bloggers by asking if they read other fashion blogs. The data indicated that participants in all three groups exhibited a genuine interest in the output of other fashion bloggers: Active Younger [67%], Active Older [84%] and Inactive Bloggers [72%]. This last figure for Inactive bloggers shows that while they may have stopped blogging themselves, a considerable number of them retain a degree of interest in fashion blogs and are therefore a valid group in terms of inclusion in this study.

The third question was designed to measure their level of interest in the output of other fashion bloggers by asking respondents to indicate the number of hours that they spent per week reading fashion blogs. Of the participants in the Active Younger group, 60% spent between one and six hours per week reading fashion blogs. Active Older participants considerably exceeded this with 74% of their group undertaking this same amount of reading. Only 50% of the Inactive blogger group indicated that they devoted this amount of time to fashion blogs.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Participants also had the opportunity to indicate that they spent less than one hour a week reading fashion blogs. The figures for this across the three groups was Active Younger 35% of the group, Active Older 20%, Inactive bloggers 50%. This last figure suggests that Inactive blogger interest in fashion blogs undergoes some degree of decline once they stop actively blogging themselves.

● Participant identification of key blogging aspects

In order to gain a wider insight into which elements of fashion blogs were of most interest to participants, they were asked to identify and comment upon those aspects which they personally felt were most useful/ enjoyable. From their comments, the seven most commonly identified features were then collated into graphic form.

Of the 214 Active Younger bloggers, 40% of the group mentioned affordable products as their first response. Their second suggestion was direct link to product [36%], which was also the second factor offered by the Inactive Bloggers [34%]. The Active Older bloggers mentioned quality images [28%] as their first response, as did the Inactive bloggers [38%]. The second suggestion of Active Older was blogger personality [23%]. In all, across the 307 respondents, these four main blog aspects identified by members of all three groups were identical.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**　　Active Older Bloggers: **Green**　　Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

● General observations from the data:

As designed, there was a clear distinction in age between the Active Younger and Active Older bloggers. However, all participants in the Inactive Blogger group shared the same under 30 age range as the Active Younger group.

There were very high numbers of experienced fashion bloggers in all three groups, with most participants having at least two years' experience of blogging before answering the questionnaire. Overall, there was therefore a high number of participants with significant experience.

In all three groups, there were significant numbers of bloggers who had gained experience of establishing and maintaining large readership followings. The number of participants with very small-scale followings was relatively low in all three groups.

There was evidence of significant overall commitment to fashion blogging throughout all three groups. Large numbers in all three groups posted to their followers on a daily or weekly basis. In all three groups, the number of bloggers who only posted on a monthly basis was a distinct minority. In all three groups, large numbers indicated that they regularly read the output of other fashion bloggers and that they committed a significant amount of time per week to this activity. The number of members of the two Active groups who spent less than one hour reading fashion blogs was relatively low.

When asked to suggest the elements in fashion blogs that they considered most useful/ enjoyable, there was a distinct similarity across all three groups in the aspects which they chose to identify i.e. affordable products, direct link to products, quality images and blogger personality.

Given the above observations, this indicates that, overall, the members of all three groups were well qualified in terms of experience, commitment and overall knowledge/ interest to participate in the research study.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Figure 4.1: Active Younger Blogger Participant Data

Active Younger Blogger Participant Data

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
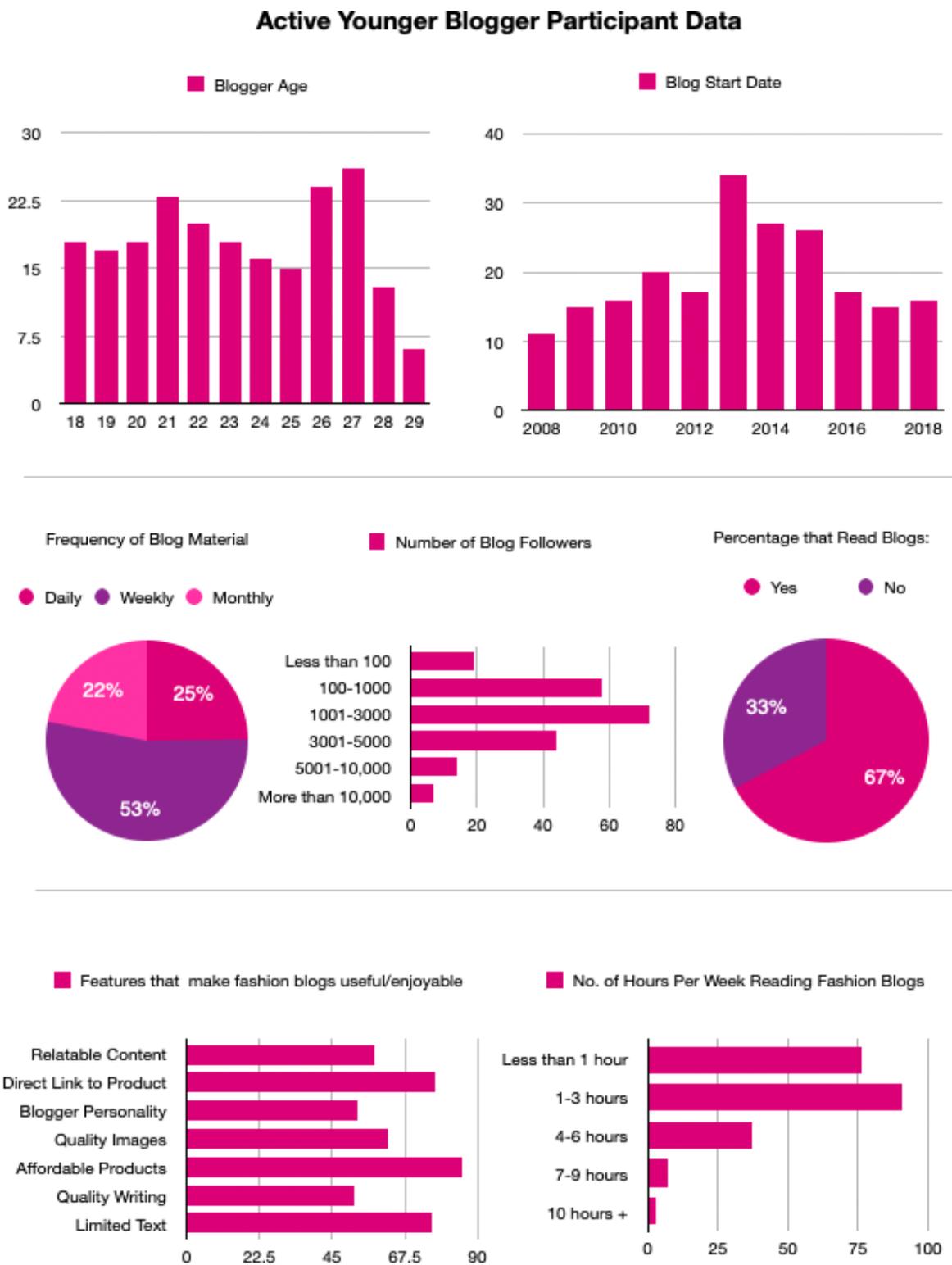
Figure 4.2: Active Older Blogger Participant Data

Older Active Blogger Participant Data

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
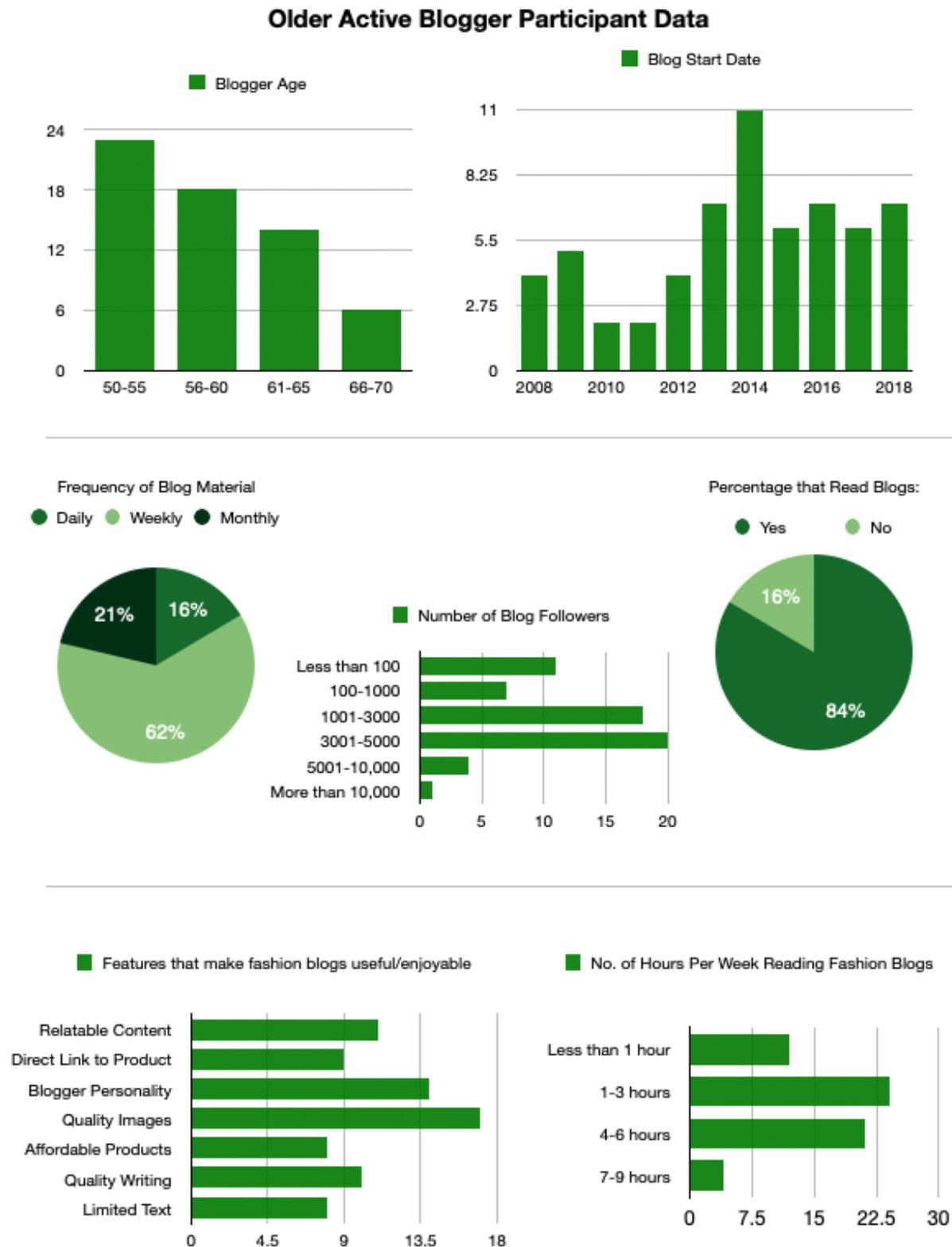
Figure 4.3: Inactive Blogger Participant Data

Inactive Blogger Participant Data

Blogger Age

Blog Start Date

Blog End Date

Frequency of Blog Material

● Daily ● Weekly ● Monthly

6% 16%

78%

Number of Blog Followers

Less than 100
100-1000
1001-3000
3001-5000
5001-10,000
More than 10,000

Percentage that Read Blogs:

● Yes ● No

28%

72%

Features that make fashion blogs useful/enjoyable

Relatable Content
Direct Link to Product
Blogger Personality
Quality Images
Affordable Products

No. of Hours Per Week Reading Fashion Blogs

Less than 1 hour
1-3 hours
4-6 hours
7-9 hours
10 hours or more

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.3 Theme One: Motivations to blog

The questions in section 3 investigated the subject of 'motivations to blog' in order to understand participants' reasons for beginning to blog and to establish whether this original motivation had changed over time. Participants were asked: *What was your main initial motivation for starting your blog?* Figure 4.4 below highlights the responses made from all research participants, whilst Figure 4.5 demonstrates the differing emphases observed in the responses made by each participant group.

Figure 4.4 Initial motivation to blog: all 307 respondents:

Initial Motivation to Blog:

All Participants - 307

- Personal Hobby - 39%
- Potential Income - 25%
- Career Enhancer - 17%
- Make Friends Online - 16%
- Marketing Tool - 3%
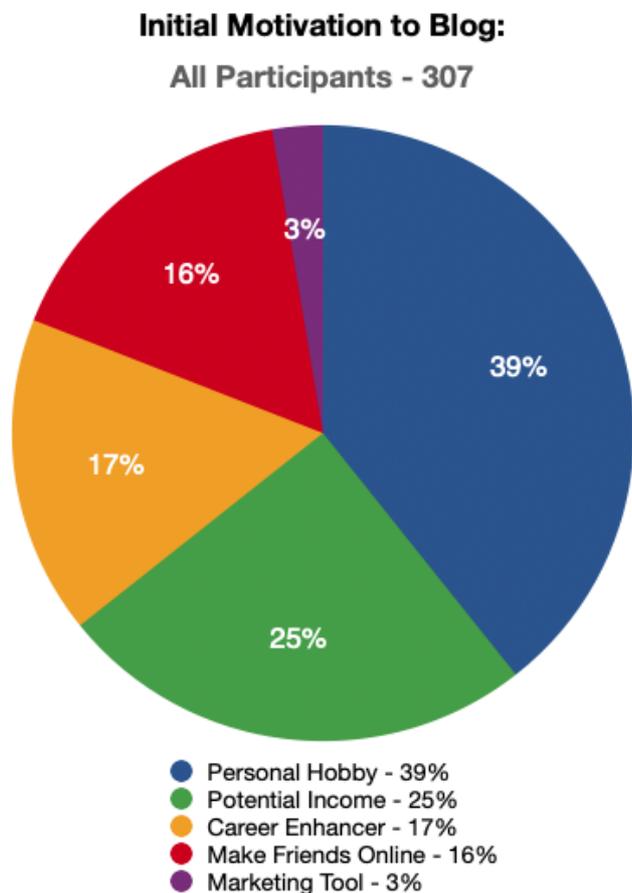
Figure 4.5 Initial motivation to blog: overall results for each individual group:

Initial Motivation to Blog:
Active Younger Bloggers - 214

- Personal Hobby - 42%
- Potential Income - 29%
- Career Enhancer - 21%
- Make Friends Online - 7%
- Marketing Tool - 1%

Initial Motivation to Blog:
Active Older Bloggers - 61

- Personal Hobby - 33%
- Potential Income - 15%
- Career Enhancer - 7%
- Make Friends Online - 40%
- Marketing Tool - 5%

Initial Motivation to Blog:
Inactive Bloggers - 32

- Personal Hobby - 34%
- Potential Income - 13%
- Career Enhancer - 9%
- Make Friends Online - 38%
- Marketing Tool - 6%

More than a third of all respondents [39%] selected *personal hobby* as their main initial motivation for fashion blogging. In their responses, they frequently indicated that the act of blogging offered them a creative outlet and provided a personal pleasure. One 27-year-old Active Younger blogger, who has been blogging since 2012, stated: *"Blogging is my hobby, I love the diary aspect of my blog and I love being able to look back and see what I was doing".* Several respondents made this connection between the traditional hobby of diary writing and the similar opportunities for personal reflection and memory available from blogging. Others expressed the sense of satisfaction that came from personal ownership of the material they had created. One 28-year-old Inactive Blogger, who stopped blogging in 2019, added: *"It was just a hobby to begin with, a place where I could share my love for fashion and have my own little corner of the internet".* Others referred to the fact that blogging gave them the opportunity to enjoy the ability to document their life online using several media. For example, a 56-year-old Active Older participant who has been blogging since 2017, reflected: *"I thought it would be fun to share outfits I had worn or places I had been, I love writing and photography".* As the quote directly above indicates, respondents were also motivated to blog because it was an activity that gave them a space in which to share their interest in fashion with likeminded individuals. This finding corresponds with Nardi *et al* (2004) and Hsu and Lin (2008).

A similar percentage of participants among the Active Older Bloggers [40%] and Inactive Bloggers [38%] expressed initial positive sentiments towards the online fashion-blogging community and described how they were first motivated to blog in order to *make friends online*, a finding which is supported in the work of Schiano *et al* (2004), Zhu and Tan (2007) and Ekdale *et al* (2010). Several respondents described the positive social benefits that they experienced as a result of the process of getting involved in the blogosphere: *"I liked to read other blogs and talk about things with other likeminded people, I made some really nice internet friends through blogging".* The opportunity to make new friends online was valued by respondents in all groups, as this Active Older 56-year-old indicated: *"I've gone on to meet lots of lovely other bloggers online and made some good friends along the way".* As also indicated in the work of Doyle *et al* (2012) and Jablonska and Sniegula (2017), it was clear that the majority of the bloggers in these groups often tended to have initial motives for blogging that were not inspired by the hope of financial reward. Their comments often emphasised that they were initially more motivated by personal factors rather than commercial gain, as stated by this 26-year-old Inactive Blogger: *"I started my blog back in 2007 and it wasn't for money, it was purely a hobby for me to share my thoughts and keep in touch with friends and family".* It is, however, interesting to note that only 7% of participants in the Active Younger blogger group selected *make friends online* as their main initial motivation to blog. Nevertheless, these participants often also offered similar non-commercial opinions: *"I never started the blog with the intention of making money or a career out of this, it has always just been something I do for fun".* From the above data and comments, it is clear that a substantial number of respondents across all three groups claim that they began blogging from altruistic/ idealistic motives.

The second largest group of all respondents [25%] indicated that they were always initially more motivated by the potential rewards that could be gained from blogging: *"I was really motivated to start a fashion blog to see if I could work with brands and receive products to review. I wanted to see if I could earn some money and make a career from the channel".* Many respondents were clearly inspired by the commercial success that others were beginning to develop by building up a

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

presence in the blogosphere: *"I could see that others were becoming very successful through blogging and I suppose, I wanted to achieve that for myself too, I wanted to do what they were doing"*. Similar motives were observed by McFarlane and Samsioe (2020). However, there was a significant difference between the three participant groups: respondents who selected *potential income* as their primary motivation were largely members of the Active Younger blogger group. Almost 30% of this group selected *potential income* whereas the number of respondents in the other two groups was significantly lower [15% and 13%].

One highly experienced 26-year-old interviewee from the Active Younger bloggers, with more than a decade's background in sustained fashion blogging at the time of interview, offered a very detailed and precise explanation of why she began blogging. From the outset, she felt that blogging provided her with the opportunity to gain practical digital experience that would be helpful in her future education and possible professional development: *"I wanted to study for a fashion degree and work in the fashion industry, and I knew that running a blog would be great experience to add to a personal statement and be a great point on my CV. It seemed like the best way to get into university"*. Her motivation stemmed from a longer-term plan that promised eventual financial benefits through personal development rather than the straightforward reward of sponsored gift from companies.

The comment made by this 25-year-old Active Younger blogger was typical of a number of respondents who were aware that their decision to blog for commercial reasons was at odds with the original hobbyist ideals of the fashion blogosphere. She was aware that that fashion blogging was originally intended to be a hobby but admitted that she had been unable to resist the lure of financial rewards: *"I would like to say that I started it just as a hobby but honestly, I saw that others were making a career from it, or certainly making money, and I was drawn in by that aspect"*. This comment above confirms that the inducement of *potential income* and *career enhancement* had already become strong motivational factors for some participants in this study at a time when many fashion bloggers still primarily valued the activity for its personal and social benefits. This echoes the findings of Hall (2017) and Mutum *et al* (2018) who detected an increasing

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

emphasis upon commercial and career incentives across the general blogosphere. The selected comments included above also indicate the generally candid remarks made by many of the 25% of respondents who openly welcomed the opportunity to receive rewards for their blogging efforts.

The online questionnaire also offered participants the option of selecting *Marketing Tool for Established Business* as one of the possible motivations for starting their blog. This was included in the study as this motivational factor occasionally appears in studies of the general blogosphere (Eagleman, 2013; Ranga and Sharma, 2014; Evans *et al* 2017). Only eight respondents in this study selected this option, and of these only one, a 58-year-old member of the Active Older Blogger group, provided a clear explanation for her choice: *"I started blogging to promote a book that I wrote but it quickly turned into a hobby where I just started to share my interests, mainly fashion and books, with others online".* For this participant, blogging was initially merely a tool in order to further her career ambitions and satisfy her commercial objectives. Her comment was not only unique but was unusual in that her direction of travel into the fashion blogosphere began with an openly commercial intent. Her decision to continue with the activity was distinctly different from those of many other respondents who claimed to have begun as hobbyists.

4.3.1 Changes in blog motivation

Figure 4.6: changes in blog motivation:

Changes in Blog Motivation

All Participants - 307

- Potential Career Opportunities - 48%
- Blog Benefits - 32%
- No Notable Change - 20%

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
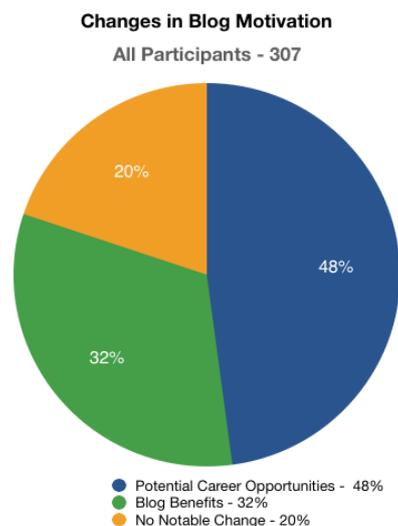
The third section of the questionnaire was designed to investigate the extent to which participants felt that their main motivation to blog had changed over time. Members of all three groups indicated a general change in their attitudes towards blogging from merely personal factors towards *potential career opportunities* and *blog benefits.* Overall, a highly significant number of all respondents [80%] recognised a change in their motivation in this direction, with many emphasising their increased awareness of the different ways in which they could realise material benefits from running a fashion blog. Some respondents primarily hoped to make a private income from their expertise as individual blogging practitioners. Many also hoped that their blogging experience would make them more attractive as potential employees within digital and fashion industries.

Numerous respondents within the Active Younger blogger group commented upon their hopes that they might earn potential rewards by turning their blog into a regular income stream. One 27-year-old, blogging since 2016, stated: *"I'm hoping to get to the point where I will make a living through my blog. I'm already earning a really solid second income, so I would love to see that grow".* A similar comment was made by a 28-year-old, who was equally experienced: *"I realised I could start making money from my blog, so what was once a small hobby is now generating a small income".*

Many participants also indicated that they were aware of the ways in which blogging could help them develop useful technical and creative skills that could enhance their employability. Frequent comments such as *"blogging gives me a lot of valuable skills that employers are looking for these days"* provide evidence that these participants were reflecting upon the ways in which their blogging experience was potentially *career enhancing* and could make them more marketable to future employers, as also noted by Dou *et al* (2012) and See-To and Ho (2014). Respondents making comments such as these often felt that blogging was making themselves more employable in relevant career sectors such as digital and fashion marketing. For them, blogging was an important way of showing potential employers their interest in and dedication to following a career in these areas. It also allowed them to develop greater expertise and confidence both in writing and then sharing their written and visual product, in addition to

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acquiring greater familiarity with a range of relevant software. One 25-year-old Active Younger blogger described the positive impact that blogging had had upon her: *"I used to think that nobody cared about my blog posts but over time my follower number grew, and I realised people are interested in hearing what I have to say about fashion and trends, and I'm now at a point where I feel really comfortable sharing my work and photography"*.

A considerable number of participants drawn from all three groups [32%] affirmed that they felt more incentivised and motivated to continue blogging when they began to receive material benefits such as free items from companies. Many of these participants expressed a degree of excited enthusiasm for receiving material benefits, as also noted by Abidin (2017). As one 24-year-old Active Younger blogger declared: *"It makes me feel good and gives me motivation to keep doing what I'm doing"*, while a 27-year-old Inactive Blogger remembered that: *"I really enjoyed receiving free items, as it actually helped me to blog. It allowed me to have content to write about and I felt motivated to keep doing it so that I could receive more free stuff"*. One 53-year-old participant within the Active Older Blogger group who began blogging in 2015, also noted that, without the incentivisation of sponsorship, she may have decided to discontinue her blogging activity: *"It has really motivated me to continue blogging, I think without brand sponsorship, I might have stopped by now"*.

4.3.2 Long-term goal for blog

In their comments, a significant number of Active Younger bloggers [75%] consistently expressed the hope of turning their channel into a full-time activity that might develop into a more reliable source of income: *"I'd love to make enough money to support myself solely through the blog"*. These participants often indicated that they were aware of the lucrative commercial advantages that blogging could offer them if they were willing to invest sufficient time: *"I know that it's possible to make a lot of money through my blog, and I want to try and do that, I want to explore that possibility and see if I can make it my full-time job"*. Similar findings were also noted by Jin and Phua (2014) and Eisend *et al* (2020) in their studies in the general blogosphere. When discussing their longer-

term ambitions as bloggers, a small number of participants amongst both the Active Younger and Older blogger groups mentioned specific numerical goals that they hoped to achieve in relation to growing the size of their following. In all of these cases, their goals were always relatively small-scale and expressed a realistic view of what the respondent thought was achievable for their blog: *"My long-term goal is to reach 10,000 followers, I'd say that is my main aim"* and *"I'd like to get to 5,000 followers and see better engagement with my content in terms of page views".* No respondents in the overall group admitted to imagining that they could achieve the status of a 'macro blogger'.

Within this group of commercially ambitious Active Younger and Older bloggers, a number of respondents also indicated their need to have targets based on a mixture of personal and professional values, and not just upon monetary commercial success, as also suggested by Ramirez (2018) and Rocamora (2018). The comments made by some of these participants indicated that their understanding of blogging success was also expressed in terms of becoming better recognised, respected figures within the blogging community. They acknowledged that this was an effective way of transforming their blog into an influential online brand and building its viability. Thus one 64-year-old stated: *"I would like to be seen as a recognised voice for older women when it comes to style and how to dress as you get older".* Significantly, this respondent's ambition for her blog was expressed in wholly personal rather than in commercial terms. Implicit in her comment is her desire to be recognised for being knowledgeable in terms of fashion and style. One 28-year-old also offered a comment that expressed her hope that she could build a reputation as a fashion commentator but in this case her underlying aim was to turn her hobby blog into a commercial business: *"The dream would be to build the blog into a brand and become known and respected for my fashion commentary".* The remark directly above confirms that many bloggers do hope to benefit from the potential financial opportunities that can flow as their influence in the blogosphere develops over time. Their comments also show that they are aware of the opportunities presented by influencer marketing, that is the practice of companies identifying new 'unknown' individuals already operating on social media who possess characteristics that are suitable for

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

promoting their products and services to a specific target audience (Campbell and Farrell, 2020).

However, many respondents within this commercially ambitious group also realised that developing their blog output into a full-time viable income stream was becoming increasingly difficult due to the intense competition within the vast and ever-enlarging fashion blogosphere. One 25-year-old participant said: *"I would love to make a living out of my blog but let's be realistic, there's so much competition these days"*, whilst a 27-year-old year old added: *"I would love to make blogging my professional career, but I am aware that it might not be a long-term thing, there are so many other bloggers out there"*. Other respondents accepted that generating an occasional second income from their blog was a more realistic long-term goal. One 56-year-old Active Older participant expressed a limited ambition for her blog: *"I can't really see it giving me a full-time income, I'm happy to get a little bit of pocket money from it"*. Another typical remark was made by an Active Younger blogger who dreamed of financial success but accepted that she also had to limit her aspirations: *"It would be amazing if I could make it full-time but at the moment, I'm treating it as a hobby which sometimes has perks"*. These comments suggest that many participants maintained an essentially hobbyist status, not from choice but because they understood that becoming a global fashion influencer was unlikely.

By contrast, a substantial number of participants across all three groups [20%] continued to cite personal and social reasons as the main driver for their blogging activity, and they did so in a consistently convincing manner. These participants demonstrated a strong interest in the process of fashion blogging for its own value, and the personal and social benefits that it could bring them, as confirmed by these Active Younger bloggers: *"blogging is such a great personal outlet for me to share my inner thoughts and interests, I love it for that"* and *"I love my blog, it's my creative space and after all these years, I still continue to love writing and sharing pictures through my posts"*. In many participant statements of this kind, the declared ultimate purpose for blogging was primarily '*blogging for themselves*', a goal which still chimes with the early findings of Herring *et al* (2005) and Nowson and Oberlander (2006) who were investigating blogger values

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

in an arguably less commercialised period. Younger and Older study participants who shared these idealistic values also frequently emphasised the importance they attached to creating high-quality content of which they could be proud, and which satisfied their personal blogging standards. For these participants, it was also essential to create fashion material that was helpful and of interest to others in their loyal follower base: *"I've always loved fashion and love to share my knowledge with others, and if I can help others through my posts, then that's great"* and *"I love to create new, interesting content that might be helpful to my readers"*. This emphasis upon a connection with readers that was based upon sharing and helping was also observed in the general blogosphere by Rahman (2017) and Glucksman (2017).

It is significant to note that a number of participants in this value-driven and more community-minded group often used the concept of 'influence' in their comments but consistently did so in terms of building longer-term relationships with their readers rather than in a commercial context. These bloggers used the vocabulary of influence and influencers but generally did so when referring to their hoped-for longer-term relationship with blog readers who were looking for fashion and style advice. Thus, one 50-year-old member of the Active Older Bloggers reported that: *"Ideally, I'd really like to become a well-known blogger, influencer even, that my readers know they can come back to when looking for helpful and realistic fashion advice for women my age"*. For this respondent, becoming an influencer was primarily a means towards helping and educating her followers in a credible way with no explicit reference made to financial advantages.

Overall, however, the majority of participants who expressed a values-driven approach to blogging, were generally content to continue to blog for hobbyist reasons: personal pleasure, social outcomes such as making friends and/or a creative release from their daily life and professional work. Many respondents in this group commented at length on the benefits they received from creating and maintaining a blog. One 53-year-old member of the Active Older group stated: *"I spend my working life writing content for clients or for the company that I work for, and I never get to write for myself in my own tone and writing style, so that is something I love about my blog, it's a release from my professional life"* , whilst

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one 26-year-old member of the Inactive blogger group revealed: *"It was always a release from my professional life, it was something that I did for me"*. Respondents who offered comments of this kind generally made little or no remarks about the possible commercial benefits of blogging. The continuing importance of creative personal pleasure for many bloggers was also observed by Chen (2015) and Balabanis and Chatzopoulou (2019).

4.3.3 Theme one discussion: motivations to blog

A number of early researchers (Nardi *et al*, 2004: Zhu and Tan, 2007: Ekdale *et al*, 2010) identified a set of initial key motivations for blogging which stressed personal and community-minded feelings about the activity. The continuing importance of these motivations for many bloggers were confirmed in the findings of the current research study: many still expressed a passion for blogging, and claimed that it was still essentially a personal hobby; many enjoyed the knowledge-sharing and content-creation aspects of running their own site; others indicated that the social, community aspect of the fashion-blog sector was their main motivation for continuing to blog. Many bloggers of this type also blogged in order to improve digital skills. Those who indicated a willingness to grow their blogs often did so for educative reasons i.e. to help and inform their followers. These findings also correspond with the work of Schiano *et al* (2004), Hsu and Lin (2008) and Chen (2015), who identified knowledge sharing, communication and social factors such as community identification and status as strong blog motivations. It was also evident from the findings of the current study that respondents who had been part of the blogosphere for a long period of time continued to find a high degree of personal enjoyment through the initial, original motivational factors such as social communion, as highlighted by Doyle *et al* (2012), Jablonska and Sniegula (2017) and Glucksman (2017). Many study participants highlighted the diary-like aspect of blogging, the importance of self-expression and the enjoyment which came from documenting their life online. This resonates with early researchers, such as Herring *et al*, (2005), Nowson and Oberlander (2006) and Schmidt (2007), all of whom emphasised the importance to bloggers of sharing personal experiences and reflections in relation to their continuing blog motivation.

However, it is clear that, since these early studies, there has been a shift towards more commercialised motivations, particularly with regard to participants who were generally new to the blogosphere. This development correlates with Hall (2017), who argues that newer entrants to blogging often became involved with the activity primarily because it was perceived to offer potentially lucrative opportunities. Mutum *et al* (2018) and McFarlane and Samsioe (2020) also note

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

how the opportunity to make money online through blogging has become a much stronger motivational force over time, and the results of this current study confirm this observation. A substantial number of respondents who had experienced numerous sponsorship opportunities in the past, tended to be more welcoming and accepting of commercial support, and they more readily admitted that their initial blogging motivations and long-term goal for the activity had been changed/ swayed by these material opportunities. Comments of this kind were most frequently made by members of the Active Younger blogger group, which registered the largest percentage of responses indicating that their primary interest was now in benefiting financially from their blogging activities.

An awareness of the commercial success that fellow fashion bloggers were achieving was reflected in many respondent comments. This had brought about a change in their own motivations for blogging as they now sought to emulate this success. This relates to the findings of Dou *et al* (2012), See-To and Ho (2014) and Abidin (2017), who note that, once bloggers across the blogosphere become aware of and experience potential commercial advantages, their motivations for blogging are significantly influenced by more commercial considerations. This change in initial motivation was also observed by Callahan *et al* (2018), Ramirez (2018) and Rocamora (2018) who agreed that the opportunity to make money online through blogging had become a much stronger motivating force to blog. Nevertheless, many bloggers who were successful in attracting sponsorship still appreciated the social-networking elements that motivated many pioneer bloggers.

Therefore, in response to Research Question One [to what extent, if at all, have bloggers' original motivations for starting a blog been affected by the inclusion of sponsorship?], all three groups in this study confirm that, for many participants, their motivation and goals as bloggers had shifted from merely socialising and sharing personal opinions, towards creating more commercialised blog content that was catering to an online audience for more monetarised purposes. For a distinct majority, commercial benefits were paramount, but a considerable minority continued to value and seek personal outcomes from their hobby.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.4 Theme Two: Sponsorship on blogs

When discussing the inclusion of sponsorship on blogs, a majority of participants in all three groups indicated that they had experience of accepting blog sponsorship. The figures below illustrate the result for all participants and each individual blogging group:

Figure 4.7: Sponsorship on blogs: all 307 respondents:

Have you featured sponsorship on blog?
All Participants - 307

Yes - 75%
No - 25%
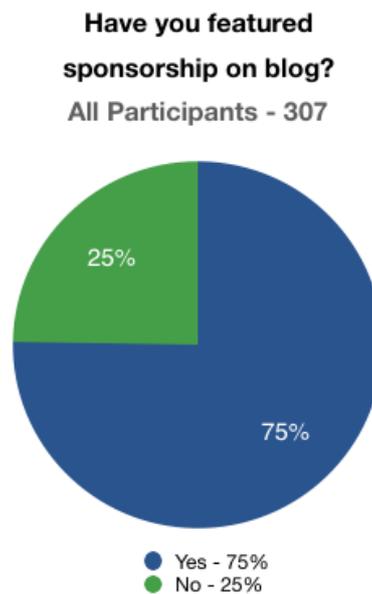
Figure 4.8: Sponsorship on blogs: overall results for each individual group:

Have you featured sponsorship on blog?
Active Younger Bloggers

Yes - 75%
No - 25%

Have you featured sponsorship on blog?
Active Older Bloggers

Yes - 72%
No - 28%

Have you featured sponsorship on blog?
Inactive Bloggers

Yes - 78%
No - 22%

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
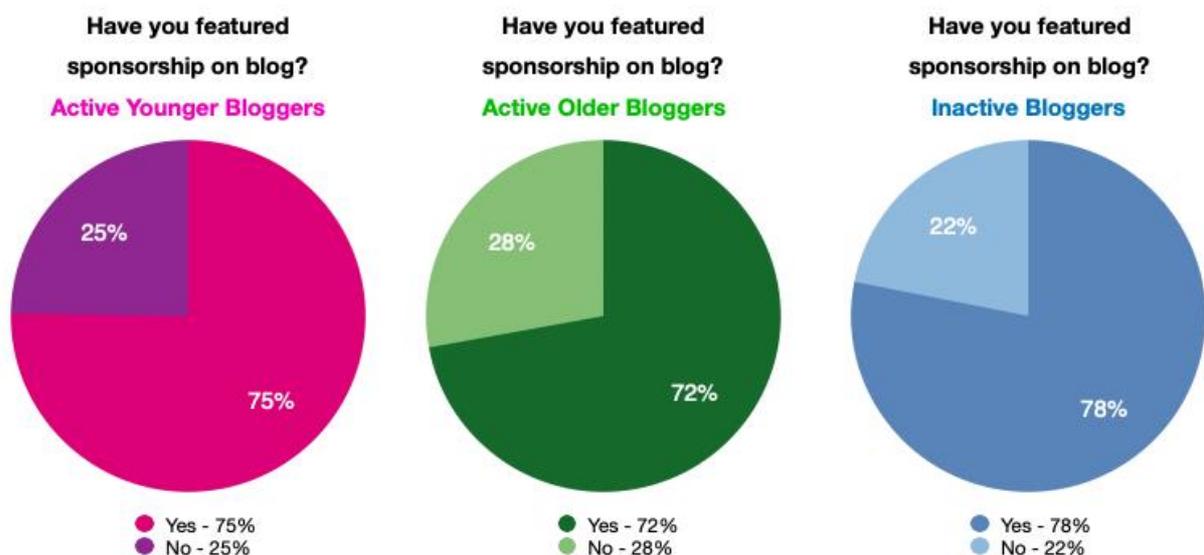
In terms of all research participants, 75% have had experience of working with brands and featuring sponsorship on their blog. The results for all three groups were similar.

Figure 4.9: frequency of sponsored material:
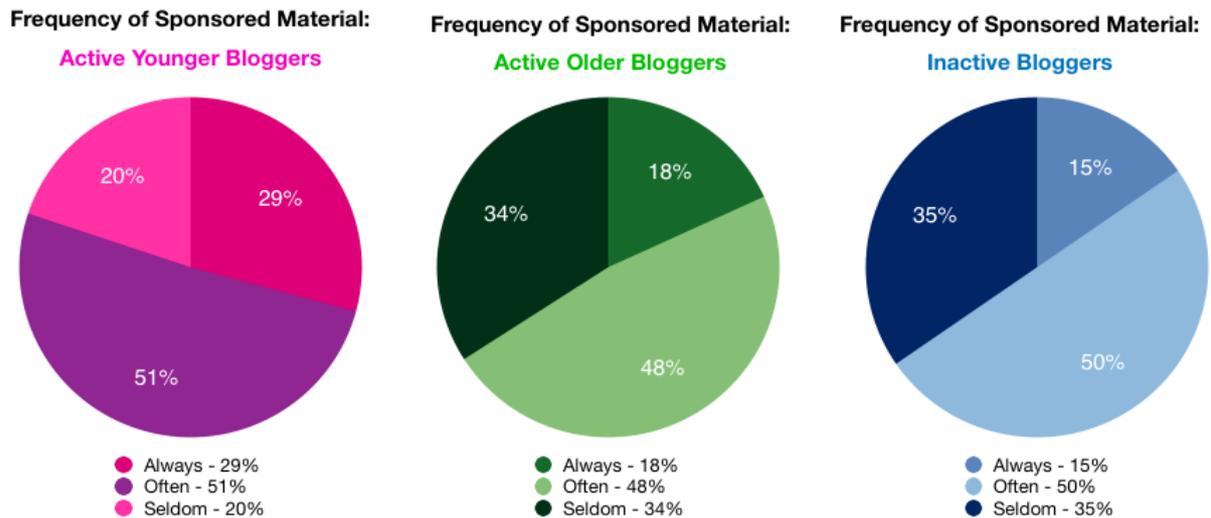
Figure 4.9 above highlights the frequency of sponsored material on blogs, with large majorities in all three groups indicating that they featured sponsored material on their blogs either *Often* or *Always*. This confirms that most respondents have had considerable experience of accepting and featuring sponsored material on their blogs.

Figure 4.10: types of sponsored material:

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
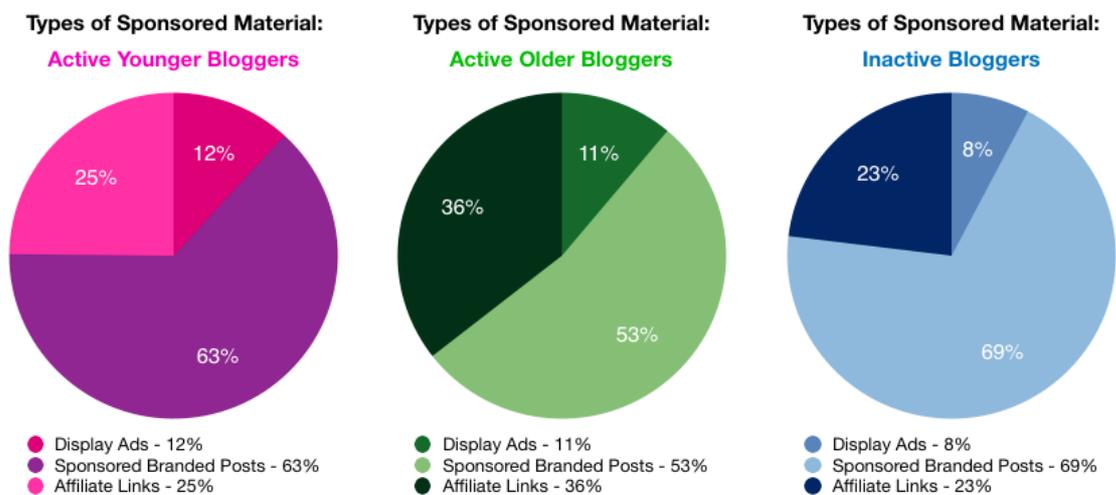
As indicated in Figure 4.10, the most frequent type of sponsored material for each participant group was identified to be *Sponsored Branded Posts*. A slight difference across the three groups can be noted as regards affiliate links, with Active Older bloggers [36%] more likely to include these in their output.

However, in their comments, a large number of respondents in all three groups expressed a very clear dislike of side-bar adverts, pop-up adverts and banner adverts: *"I avoid any sort of pop-up advert or things like that, I hate when these sorts of things are on the screen"*. Several respondents made the point that these forms of online advertising could be visually unattractive and distracting: *"I hate display adverts, they ruin the aesthetic of your blog"*, whilst others commented on the damage that they felt display adverts could have on the overall presentation of their blog posts, which in turn could affect reader perceptions of its quality: *"it can be quite embarrassing, the blogger has no control over what the advert is showing and it's not always the most appropriate for the reader"*. Similar feelings towards these types of blog advertisements have been noted by several researchers working in the general blogsphere such as Hahn and Lee (2014), Ouyang (2015), Ferreira *et al* (2017) and Mutum *et al* (2018).

The comments from all three groups indicated that sponsored branded posts were preferred because the blogger felt able to retain a greater degree of control over the textual content and visual appearance of their blog post, a finding which is also supported in the work of Marwick (2013), Duffy (2017) and McRae (2017). In contrast to other types of sponsorship, which could be perceived as intrusive and distracting, branded sponsored posts normally offer the opportunity to post information about products that can be integrated into the regular text and format of the blog. As a result, these were identified as a more suitable, convenient and popular method for featuring sponsored material as fashion bloggers were generally free to create their own content about products received from brands. A significant number of respondents from across all three groups [62%] indicated that this was their preferred form of sponsorship: *"The only sponsorship that I will accept is gifted items and products, as there usually is a natural fit with my blog and fashion-orientated theme"*. They often stated that it was easier to find ways of connecting the information in the branded sponsored posts with their intended

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blog content: *"I'm happy to accept fashion products that are relevant to my own personal style, I find this really easy to incorporate into my current blog content"*. This perception that it was important to accept sponsorship that offered a natural fit with existing blog material and themes was also noted by Thoms (2013), Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) and Williams and Hodges (2016).

4.4.1 Reaction to sponsorship

Participants were asked to reflect upon their initial feelings when they were first offered a sponsorship opportunity by a commercial source. Three common responses were noted across the groups. Almost half of the participants expressed their reaction in terms of a mixture of feeling pleasantly surprised, humbled and/or elated. The second most common response was to view this development as an indication of their blog success, while a smaller group reacted with initial wariness and caution.

Figure 4.11: Reaction to first sponsorship: all 307 respondents:

Reaction to first sponsorship:

All Participants - 307

- Shocked/ Humbled/ Elated - 48%
- Blog Success and Recognition - 37%
- Cautious Response - 15%

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
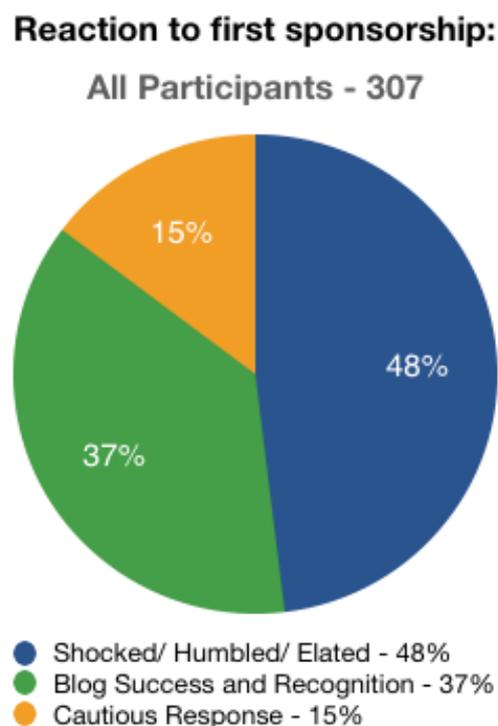
Figure 4.12: Reaction to first sponsorship offer: results for each individual group:

Reaction to first sponsorship:
Active Younger Bloggers

- Shocked/ Humbled/ Elated - 46%
- Blog Success and Recognition - 38%
- Cautious Response - 16%

Reaction to first sponsorship:
Active Older Bloggers

- Shocked/ Humbled/ Elated - 55%
- Blog Success and Recognition - 34%
- Cautious Response - 11%

Reaction to first sponsorship:
Inactive Bloggers

- Shocked/ Humbled/ Elated - 48%
- Blog Success and Recognition - 37%
- Cautious Response - 15%

Almost half of all respondents across all the participant groups [48%] indicated that they had felt a considerable degree of excitement and elation when they were first offered sponsorship: *"I was absolutely over the moon"* and *"I was delighted, I was completely blown away, my initial response was literally: wow!"*. Many in this group expressed a strong degree of personal pleasure from the realisation that the high quality of their blogging output had been recognised by a commercial company: *"It was amazing to know that a brand wanted to work with me and send me free clothes"*. These respondents frequently referred to the sense that their hard work as a blogger was not only being recognised but also rewarded: *"it was a great feeling to know a company had seen my blog and wanted to send me something"*. It was clear from the strong feelings of personal joy and satisfaction that participants expressed at being recognised in this way was highly significant for them: *"oh, it was a wonderful feeling, it was a massive confidence boost"* and *"being recognised by a brand that I loved made me feel special, it felt nice to be rewarded in that respect"*. Respondents in this group also often used initial expressions of shock and surprise to describe their feelings, as the sponsorship offer was clearly quite unexpected in these cases: *"I was truly shocked. I was shocked that a brand was looking at my blog and wanted to send me their products"*, *"I was quite shocked actually, it was quite a surreal moment"* and *"When I got the first ever email, I couldn't believe it… I had to read the email over and over, I just could not believe they wanted to work with little old me"*.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

When reflecting on the use of sponsorship on their blog, many respondents generally agreed that collaborating with brands and featuring sponsored content on a blog was a strong indicator of *"real success as a blogger"*. Participants from all three groups [37%] made comments that reflected upon the ways in which the inclusion of sponsorship made them feel more accomplished as a blogger, using language which referred to concepts such as legitimacy, validity and credibility: *"When you see bloggers working with big brands, I think it helps to legitimise them as fashion writers, it suggests they know what they are talking about"*, *"It gave me validation in being a blogger and I felt that I was on my way to becoming a credible writer for readers to follow"* and *"If a blogger has been recognised by a brand, then they must be a good blogger and it does boost their credibility in my eyes if a brand is giving them their trust"*. All three of the quotes above are typical of the many comments by respondents that made a clear connection between working with brands and a sense of enhanced professionalism. Implicit in all three quotes is the sense that working with a brand also lends a degree of authenticity to the fashion bloggers' output. Comments of this kind were made by members of all three groups. They demonstrate the emphasis that many fashion bloggers place upon sponsorship as a valuable indicator of their perceived professionalism and credibility within the blogosphere.

In addition, many of these respondents went on to describe how receiving recognition from a brand helped not just to strengthen their own personal sense of success but provided encouraging evidence of their progress as a fashion blogger, cementing their position as a credible and legitimate contributor to the blogosphere: *"Working with brands is great for recognition, it puts you on a pedestal"* and *"it made me realise I was doing something right, and it did have to be right if a global brand was wanting to work with me, right?",* a finding that is also recognised by Banet-Weiser (2012), Fischer (2017) and Faleatua (2018).

Nevertheless, when asked if sponsorship was their preferred indicator for measuring their success as a blogger, comments by 32% of participants in all three groups identified personal and social factors such as their own satisfaction and reader engagement as also being very important ways of measuring their

success. For example, one 65-year-old participant from the Active Older blogger group particularly focused on the personal enjoyment that she continued to receive from her hobby: *"my measure of success is whether I'm having fun and enjoying it"*. Other participants identified positive feedback from readers as their preferred indicator or measure of success, especially when it conveyed evidence that they had helped, advised or in some other way had made a positive impact. One 27-year-old Active Younger blogger added: *"I think a measure of success is when people say they find my content useful, I love knowing that I have given someone inspiration, that's more important to me and that's what I see as success"*. Others referred to the ways in which their blog content may have had some degree of informative, educational impact on their readers: *"I think general feedback on my content from real people if they have learnt something or if something has been helpful – that is more valuable to me right now"*. And a number of respondents particularly emphasised that they felt successful when reader feedback suggested that they had had a significant inspirational impact. For example, one 25-year-old Inactive blogger who stopped blogging in 2018 said: *"I was far more inspired by the readers and when people got in touch to say they liked my post or they were inspired by something I had said or done, that was always far more rewarding"*. These ways of measuring personal success in the general blogosphere were also recorded by Pittman (2015), Hall (2017) and Panchal and Cassidy (2018).

A small number of participants across the three groups [15%] reported that they had mixed and often hesitant feelings about their first sponsorship offer, and that they had given considerable thought to the consequences of incorporating sponsored material into their blog. These participants expressed three main concerns that they had about the potential consequences of commercialising their blog output, even to a small degree. For some participants, there was a feeling that including sponsored material would force them to be more professional and creative in terms of their blog presentation, as evidenced by one 28-year-old Inactive blogger: *"I wasn't sure if my blog was up to scratch and was worried about creating high quality content for the brand"*. Others appreciated that incorporating sponsored material had ethical consequences: they would have to

give more thought to being careful about the kind of material that they accepted and consider its suitability in terms of their own values: "*You have to be careful who you partner with, and you should really only promote brands that you actually like, and items that you would you normally wear yourself*". A number of these participants also expressed concern about the impact of sponsorship on blog-reader response and on their own perceived authenticity as a reliable, disinterested fashion blogger, as one 24-year-old Active Younger blogger added: "*I was instantly cautious. I was happy that a brand had noticed me, but I think that's where a lot of blogging can go wrong, and people can lose their authenticity with their readership*". This further comment specifically pointed to the importance of keeping the expectations of her readership when planning to link up with a commercial sponsor: "*I'm always a little bit wary when a company gets in touch, I like to only accept items and take part in collaborations that fit my existing style and won't look out of place to my readers, I think you have to stay true to yourself and not sell out*". This hesitant reaction towards an offer of commercial involvement has also been observed by Shiau (2014), Haley *et al* (2014), Riboni (2017) and Hanusch, Banjac and Maares (2019).

4.4.2 Reasons for accepting sponsorship

When the research respondents were asked to identify their main reason for initially including sponsored material on their blog, five common themes emerged across the three groups. Similar to the findings of Hunter (2015) and Eisend *et al* (2020), the largest number of comments mentioned receipt of financial and/or product rewards [38%] and increased exposure for their blog [20%], as the two main reasons why they were happy to feature advertising.

Figure 4.13: Main reason for accepting sponsorship: all 307 respondents:

**Main reason for first acceptance of
sponsorship compensation:**

All Participants - 307

- Money and Free Products - 38%
- Blog Exposure - 20%
- Product and Brand Match - 19%
- Love for the Brand - 13%
- Build a Relationship with Brand - 10%
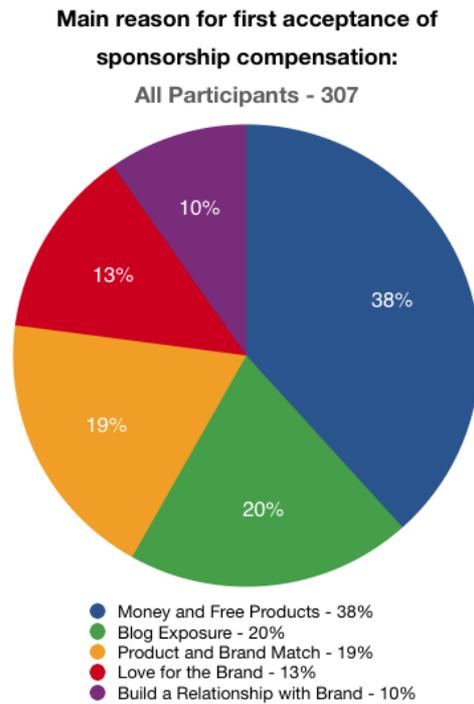
Figure 4.14: Main reason for accepting sponsorship: results for each group:

**Main reason for first acceptance
of sponsorship compensation:**
Active Younger Bloggers

- Money and Free Products - 43%
- Blog Exposure - 20%
- Product and Brand Match - 14%
- Love for the Brand - 12%
- Build a Relationship with Brand - 11%

**Main reason for first acceptance
of sponsorship compensation:**
Active Older Bloggers

- Money and Free Products - 23%
- Blog Exposure - 18%
- Product and Brand Match - 36%
- Love for the Brand - 16%
- Build a Relationship with Brand - 7%

**Main reason for first acceptance
of sponsorship compensation:**
Inactive Bloggers

- Money and Free Products - 31%
- Blog Exposure - 19%
- Product and Brand Match - 19%
- Love for the Brand - 23%
- Build a Relationship with Brand - 8%

A small number of respondents across the three groups [13%] indicated that the main reason they initially posted sponsored material was that they specifically liked the particular brand that had offered them rewards, usually in the form of

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free fashion products: *"I was really happy to be working with a fashion brand that I loved and shopped with all the time anyway, it was a perfect match".* For many of the participants with this view, it was a perfectly acceptable new development in their blogging experience: *"I was really excited to be working with a brand that I loved, I was really happy to be sent free clothes – who wouldn't love that?".* This preference for working with companies that were already familiar and liked by an individual has also been noted by McCormick and Livett (2012), Perse and Lambe (2016) and Glucksman (2017).

Both quotes above clearly illustrate the initial sense of excitement expressed by many respondents when first offered sponsorship opportunities. However, responses to this question also generally demonstrate that many respondents had given serious thought to the implications of accepting products, and that their views were based on a number of considerations. For example, a small number of participants [10%] indicated that they especially valued the opportunity of *"building a lasting relationship"* and/ or becoming a *"long-term brand ambassador"* with a particular fashion company. These respondents explained that they felt that consistently showcasing products from one company indicated a genuine use of the product, and a preference for it. One 28-year-old Active Younger blogger described her long-term involvement with a major fashion brand, detailing how her relationship with them worked for her and for the brand: *"I've worked with this well-known brand for eight months now. At the beginning of every month, a new collection comes out and I have to order three new items within a certain number of days and post three Instagram stories and two blog posts by the end of the next month. It's been a great match and has worked out really well for both myself and the brand, I know what I have to work to as every month it's the same".* Her sustained relationship with the brand had encouraged a routine and structure in her blog posting that she clearly enjoyed, and which had been beneficial for both her and the company. She also commented that she felt that this collaboration was viewed positively in the eyes of her readers: *"I think my audience like to see me working with the same brand too, I'm loyal to the company and wear these items in my daily life, and my readers have picked up on that and the feedback is really good".* She was typical of a number of bloggers who offered evidence to show that an extended collaboration with a brand helped them project

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credible content in an authentic voice to their readership: "*I think my readers have found it to be a more authentic partnership*".

Within this group, a number of participants also commented upon their willingness to work with smaller brands from their city or local area, in an attempt to offer support and marketing help to smaller, local companies. This was seen as helpful for the companies concerned but also a source of personal reward for the blogger, as one 27-year-old stated: "*I'm really happy to help out smaller, more local brands that are in my city. I find that quite rewarding as they don't always have the time or skill to do it for themselves*". This willingness to particularly help local businesses was common across the age range of participants. A typical comment was made by a 65-year-old Active Older blogger: "*I do like to help smaller brands, that's a really rewarding thing out of all of this*".

These quotes above are of interest as they suggest that, despite their differing age profiles, participants from both the Active Younger and Older groups saw value in working with smaller label brands, rather than securing more lucrative commercial interaction with 'big label' companies. Participants in both groups clearly perceived this to be a particularly rewarding service that they could offer through their blog, and which had benefits that were both social and communitarian as much as financial, an aspiration also observed by Rugova and Prenaj (2016) and Sudha and Sheena (2017).

Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents [19%], particularly from the Active Older blogger group, also disclosed that they preferred to accept sponsored material when they felt that the products on offer were a good match for the existing tone, quality and content of their blog posts: "*I have only ever accepted products that are a good match, and that fit with the fashion themes of my blog*". Participants offered a number of additional reasons that helped to confirm this common decision: it was important to them that the offer was made by a company that they had shopped with before, that the offered products were relevant to fashion blog themes of current interest to them, and/or the products were of a standard and quality that the blogger herself was happy to accept and showcase: "*I was happy to accept the sponsorship because it was a well-respected brand*

that is on our high-street, I knew the quality of the products would be good and I shop there myself" and *"I was always happy to accept fashion products from brands that I already shopped with, as you knew the quality would be good and I knew what to expect"*. This finding correlates with Lu, Chang and Chang (2014) and Montecchi and Nobbs (2017), who have also documented similar factors individuals may consider before accepting sponsorship.

Over a third of participants within the Active Older blogger group [36%] selected 'Product and Brand Match' as an important factor when collaborating with sponsors, a much higher percentage than in the other two groups in the study. This does therefore highlight a small distinction among the participant age groups, suggesting that older bloggers may be more conscious of this factor when collaborating with brands.

4.4.3 Mixed feelings of accepting sponsorship

When asked to comment on whether they had ever experienced mixed feelings when accepting sponsorship, a significant number of respondents [76%] revealed that they had felt this way, and many offered a range of explanatory reasons. Some indicated that they felt uncomfortable posting content from a brand which they felt was an inappropriate match in terms of their existing blog content and which might not meet the likely expectations of their own blog readership. For example, one 53-year-old blogger shared an experience of being approached by a clothing brand whose products were almost exclusively targeted at much younger consumers in the teenage market sector: *"I've had a number of fashion brands get in touch and want to send me items, but they have sometimes been inappropriate for my audience, or things that a woman of my age would not wear"*. Other respondents were concerned that, in addition to a sponsor's products being inappropriate, the relationship with the company could also begin to affect their own sense of being in control of the tone and content of their blog. They were worried that: *"the brand might start to ask for content that seems a bit unnatural for my blog".* Other participants feared losing a potential opportunity to promote their blog more widely. This Older blogger expressed the dilemma that she felt.

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She was not fully confident that the sponsoring relationship was appropriate but aware that she might be turning down an offer that might not be repeated: *"I did think to myself 'maybe I should pull the plug on this' and not publish the post, but I knew it would be a great opportunity for my blog, so I decided to go ahead with it".* Others were afraid that this might be their only chance to monetise their blog to some extent: *"I didn't want to say 'no' to a brand, it was too good an opportunity to miss"*. A significant number of respondents expressed concern that accepting sponsorship would make it more difficult for them to maintain the trust of their blog following, and some made it clear that this was a dilemma that they had reflected upon for some time: *"I've been worried in the past about posting sponsored content because I don't want my readers to feel I just gave a positive review or wrote the post because it was sponsored".* These findings were observed in earlier general studies such as Sedeke (2012) and Hahn and Lee (2014).

Participants also expressed the concern that, by accepting sponsored material from fashion companies, they would feel under pressure to make changes not just to the content but also to the structure of their blog pages. This might entail adopting new approaches involving previously unused types of software or media such as video. Several expressed concern and nervousness at posting video of themselves rather than photographs as they feared losing presentational control. One 53-year-old Active Older blogger described her reaction to being invited by a major designer brand to showcase their luxury outfits at Ascot and to manage the visual presentation of this event on the company's Instagram channel. She was quite open about her indecision about being involved in this project which she admitted was based upon a lack experience and self-confidence: *"my initial reaction was 'OMG that is terrifying!' Do I really want to do this? I've been postponing it and I haven't said no yet but I've postponed replying because I'm nervous about it, there's so much pressure there to produce good content, I would worry about every single thing that I said, what if I said something awful in front of the video? I don't do Instagram stories".* Even respondents who usually restricted themselves to photographic images felt they would have to raise their output and standard of content presentation: this comment by an Active Younger

participant was typical of many who felt: *"a lot of pressure to take higher quality photos"*. This pressure was also observed by Abidin and Ots (2017).

One clear distinction amongst the three groups was that a third of participants within the Active Younger blogger group [33%] commented that, when they initially began to blog, they had on occasion accepted sponsorship without considering some of the factors stated above (e.g. blog match and fit). They explained that this was because they were initially surprised and overwhelmed at having received recognition from a commercial brand: *"I was so overwhelmed when brands initially got in touch that I would accept anything that was free, I was really flattered"* and *"I used to just accept everything that came my way"*. These frank comments offer typical examples of participants who were largely shaping their developing blogging behaviour in response to purely commercial opportunities. Their eagerness to accept sponsored incentives was the major factor in their blog content decisions and in their responses, they made little or no reference to ethical outcomes and values.

However, almost a quarter of all respondents [24%] indicated that they had not experienced mixed feelings about including sponsored material on their blog. These participants, drawn from all three groups, reiterated justifications for this view in terms similar to those given above e.g. that sponsorship content had been a welcome opportunity for their blog. Members of this group frequently emphasised that they tended to only accept sponsorship from trusted brands and only posted information about products that were a suitable match for their blog. As a result, they took the view that their sponsorship experience was positive in almost all respects. Evidence of this high degree of positivity came from participants across the age range, both from a 25-year-old Active Younger blogger: *"Every brand experience so far has been really fun and enjoyable. I've always been able to have my say and the brands usually leave me to create the content that I want to create"* and from a 65-year-old Active Older blogger: *"I haven't experienced anything negative when working with brands so far, it's always been a great experience that I have welcomed and enjoyed"*.

4.4.4 Honesty and sponsorship

Respondents were asked to comment on whether they had always adopted an honest and critical approach when reviewing sponsored products. There was a mixed response to this question from participants. Many respondents from all three groups [43%] commented that they were aware of the importance of always striving to maintain their credibility and therefore their trustworthiness in the eyes of their readership: *"the trust that my readers have in me and my content is very important, if you don't have your readers' trust, you have nothing, it's far more important than any free product"*. To that end, they appreciated the necessity of being honest about products: it was part of their duty as a 'genuine' fashion blogger to continue to offer impartial advice to readers rather than adapt their views about products in order to meet the needs of the sponsor: *"It's always best to be honest, I owe my blog readers a genuine review"*. These comments agree with points identified by Hansson (2015), Williams (2019) and Wellman *et al* (2020).

Several respondents expressed a deep dislike of sponsored product reviews posted by other fashion bloggers that they felt were overtly biased and distinctly uncritical. They perceived this as a betrayal of blogger duty and integrity. One 56-year-old Active Older blogger revealed: *"It annoys me when I see, what seems to be, overly-biased reviews or sponsored posts that are just far too positive to seem genuine, you know? Honesty is the best policy, and as a blog reader myself, that is what I would expect from my fellow bloggers"*. A number of comments by Older and Inactive bloggers also criticised over-enthusiastic product reviews and made similar remarks about the connection between the principles of 'good' blogging and values such as honesty and integrity. They agreed that such one-sided reviews were of no value to blog readers. In addition, one 26-year-old Inactive participant offered her view that they were also of little value to product sponsors. She felt that critical reviews helped fashion companies to better understand problems and issues about their product: *"I like to think that I was always honest with my readers, I kept my integrity rather than selling out, like many others have done. I think bloggers have a duty to be honest and if a product is rubbish, a good company will actually appreciate feedback and make improvements"*.

Implicit in the respondent comments above is the belief that a fundamental purpose of fashion blogging is to be honest about products so that blogger feedback can provide a trusted alternative to company advertising. Failure to be honest and truthful with readers by posting persistently uncritical reviews runs the risk of damaging the 'genuineness' of the blog post, losing over time the trust of the readership, and ultimately is of little benefit to the sponsor. These possibilities were observed by Metzger (2007), Wei and Lu (2013) and Neal (2017), who took the view that dishonest product reviews in the general blogosphere had a discernible impact upon the long-term credibility of blogs and their ultimate readership numbers. Despite these concerns, which were commonly held by participants in all three groups, there was in fact no evidence offered in their responses to indicate that any of them had suffered a decline in readership numbers as a result of uncritical reviewing.

Despite the strong views expressed by the participants above, a significant number of respondents from across all groups [57%] confessed that they had not always been fully honest about specific pieces of sponsored content. A number of reasons were given for this position, including a reluctance to be *"critical of something that has been sent for free"*, a dislike of posting negative remarks about products, and a general desire to try and maintain a positive tone in their blogging output: *"I always tried to find one positive thing to say about a product"*. Others indicated a preference for returning disappointing products rather than posting unflattering reviews about them: *"I would rather just send it back to the company rather than post a negative review"*. By doing this, they were avoiding expressing their actual personal views about the product. Some respondents in the group defended their action on the grounds that an individual's opinions about a fashion item were in many cases heavily subjective. One person's 'disappointing product' might be welcomed by some of their readers: *"an item that I hated, someone else might have loved it, so I always tried to keep it quite balanced"*. Similarly, as also noted by Hänninen (2016), some participants expressed feeling under pressure to accept and promote products they did not personally like. They were afraid to refuse a brand collaboration in case they missed out on possible future commercial opportunities for their blog. One 51-year-old Active Older blogger revealed: *"I have featured products on my blog that I didn't really like but I still gave a positive*

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review on my blog. I don't really see any point in saying something is bad unless the item is really, really terrible".

When respondents were asked if they had at any time returned sponsored goods that were unsuitable, 61% of all participants revealed they had not. These participants also indicated that they had received goods they did not like and, although they had not returned the item to source, they had often informed the sponsor that they were unwilling to review them: *"I've never sent something back but if I haven't liked something, I have decided not to create content about it, and I'll let the brand know that"*. In many cases, this was because the blogger did not wish to post a highly critical product review and preferred to simply ignore the product: *"I just wouldn't feature them on my blog"*. These respondents again frequently cited maintaining blog credibility and reader trust as reasons for their decisions, as found in the general blogosphere by Hahn and Lee (2014) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020).

4.4.5 Reluctance to post negative reviews

When specifically asked if they were happy to post negative product reviews, a highly significant majority of all respondents [89%] revealed that they *"never post negative reviews"* and prefer to keep their blog *"a 100% positive place"*. When asked to explain this decision, almost three-quarters [74%] of respondents from within this larger group, generally felt a strong sense of obligation to promote products in a positive manner in order to support the sponsoring brand, as well as a responsibility to ensure that their review did not impact the brand in a negative way. One 68-year-old Active Older blogger typically remarked: *"I've always wanted to help and do my best for a company, to make sure they come across in the best light"*. Another 53-year-old in this group explained how she dealt with receiving products that she could not review positively: *"I don't want the business to suffer for it. I'll speak with the brand privately and let them know how I'm feeling about it"*. Other respondents agreed that communicating with the brand first in an attempt to try and resolve a problem was preferable to simply posting an unexpected negative review or even not posting a review at all: thus one 28-

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

year-old Active Younger blogger stated: *"I always email the brand first, let them know what has happened and that I'm not going to post a review".* However, other respondents, such as this 56-year-old Active blogger, indicated that their reaction to receiving a problematic item was simply to ignore it: *"I'd rather not say anything rather than leave a negative review".*

A number of participants admitted that their thinking about negative reviews was influenced by a fear that negative posting might jeopardise the potential for future sponsorship opportunities. These comments revealed that bloggers were aware of the fact that their posts were not just being read by their particular sponsor but were almost certainly being read by a wider range of companies with an interest in identifying suitable blogs for possible advertising purposes: *"If you are reviewing a product and you give it a bad review, you are running the risk of not working with the brand again, and other brands in the industry might have second thoughts about sending you something".* The comments above are typical of many made by study participants which suggest that they have adopted a transactional business approach when dealing with brands and problem products, talking to suppliers first about these issues in the hope of resolving them, rather than sharing their concerns immediately and alerting their readers. Underlying these comments is the feeling that these bloggers do not see their primary function as openly sharing problematic information about products with their fellow reader-consumers. Rather they seem to be adopting almost a customer service role, trying to manage a product problem as 'middlemen' within a chain of business relationships between supplier and customer.

A smaller number of participants within this group [36%] also indicated an additional reason why they were reluctant to share a negative review; they believed that it would be off-putting for their readership, would reduce the appeal of their blog and have a detrimental impact on the success of their blog in terms of numbers. Thus one 28-year-old participant within the Active Younger blogger group expressed her belief that: *"nobody wants to read negative content, nobody wants to know about the worst restaurants in the city".* Similarly, one 64-year-old Active Older blogger added that it was: *"counterproductive to post something*

negative on your blog, as nobody wants to read it". The clear statement in these comments that 'nobody wants to read critical reviews' is very distanced from earlier ideas about the purpose of the blogosphere. The reluctance to post negative information about a product and/or company, and to maintain as positive a tone as possible in order to appeal to readers, clearly contrasts with one of the main functions in early fashion blogging, which was to voice unbiased product reviews. The original willingness of bloggers to post critical opinion was one of the factors which differentiated 'independent' blogs from mainstream fashion media such as magazines, which were seen as being too easily manipulated by the fashion industry. Many fashion bloggers are willing to be critical about products they do not like. However, the unwillingness of many bloggers in this particular study to be negative about products represents a considerable shift in blogging practice and may be a reflection of the way in which sponsorship opportunities have distorted the values and the voice of some current fashion bloggers.

Only a relatively small number of participants across the three groups [11%] took the alternative view that including negative reviews actually strengthened the quality of their blog output and enhanced their relationship with their readers. They indicated that they were happy to share negative sponsored product reviews and experiences, as they placed a higher priority upon maintaining their relationship with their readers rather than upon any links that they might be building with a brand. Many of these participants reiterated the essential importance of maintaining reader trust and loyalty, as highlighted by this 27-year-old Inactive blogger: *"You have to be honest as possible, there is no point even jeopardising the trust that you have with readers".* Others underlined the fundamental responsibility that they felt towards their readership when promoting sponsored items but also hinted that they acted from a sense of enlightened self-interest: *"It makes absolutely no sense to lie to your readers. If they are going to spend their hard-earned money on something I am promoting, then I am going to be honest to make sure they are not disappointed and come back angry at me".* Other respondents talked about this aspect of their relationship with their readership as if they had a directly personal connection with their followers. For example, one 28-year-old Active Younger participant who has been blogging since

2009, stated: *"I have an audience that trust me, and I've spent a long time building a strong relationship with them over the years, and if I don't like something, or something is not for me, I have a responsibility there and I am not afraid to let them know how I really feel. I think that's why after all these years, I do have a loyal audience"*.

4.4.6 Impact of sponsorship on blog writing style

When asked if they felt that accepting sponsorship had altered their blog writing style and/or had affected their opinions and approach to content in any way, over half of all the research respondents agreed [58%]. Some respondents in this group accepted that writing about sponsored content required them to adopt a more professional and advertorial writing style that was at times more commercialised and uncritical. One 51-year-old Active Older blogger stated: *"I do try and write a bit more professionally when it's a sponsored post"*. One 25-year-old Younger Active blogger also reflected on the changed tone of her output: *"I have noticed that my blog posts can read like a sales pitch at times, and I know that needs to change"*. These remarks suggest that some of these bloggers were not only aware that they were making stylistic changes to their content but were doing so self-consciously and could be self-critical about this. The particular 25-year-old Active Younger blogger quoted directly above had clearly noticed that she was using a more commercial tone in her writing and had also reflected upon this development, ultimately expressing a feeling that it was something that she needed to address and monitor. This particular participant further explained that taking part in this specific study had in fact made her reflect more deeply about her own blog writing style, and that, as a result, she was now more conscious of the need to attempt to offer a *"far more honest"* approach when reviewing sponsored items. This respondent also added that she now plans to offer readers a more discursive, balanced overview when critiquing sponsored content, rather than *"allowing brands to dictate"* her posts to some extent. This blogger self-reflection in relation to sponsored content has also been documented by Rocamora (2018), who examined the tensions that individuals can face when there is commercial blog involvement.

However, when analysing the responses of other participants across all three groups, it is clear that many respondents still felt a genuine responsibility to promote products in a positive manner. This position stemmed from a number of different aims. Some were motivated by the hope of securing future commercial opportunities, such as this 50-year-old Active Older blogger who stated: *"I want to make it look good for future brand collaborations"*. Others expressed a sense of loyalty to the brand and wanted to carry out their professional responsibilities towards the sponsor to the best of their ability. This 23-year-old Active Younger blogger took the view that she was obliged to do a professional job as part of the liaison with the brand but that this also had benefits for her own practice: *"I feel that I need to do a good job for the brand. I do try and write my posts a bit better, make it seem more professional because you don't want to embarrass the brand or yourself"*.

Nevertheless, almost half of all respondents [48%] still claimed that accepting sponsorship had not affected their blog writing style or posted opinions in any way whatsoever. Many of the comments relating to this particular issue were expressed in a very strong manner with reference to their own personal high standards: *"No, I never let that happen. I always make it clear to brands from the outset about my independence as a blogger, and I'm happy to let a company know if I have a problem with something"*, and they were similarly forthright when defending their independence as proud bloggers: *"My blog is mine. It is written in my own words and no brand is ever going to tell me what to write on it"*.

4.4.7 Refusal to accept sponsorship

Although 75% of all the research participants had accepted and featured sponsorship on their blog, there were a number of respondents from each blogging group who revealed they had never accepted sponsorship [25%]. All participants in the study were asked to outline the most frequent reasons for not accepting sponsorship, and the figures below show the most common answers found across all three groups.

Figure 4.15 Reasons for declining sponsorship: all 307 respondents:

Reasons for Declining Sponsorship:

All Participants - 307

- Low Value/ Irrelevant Product - 48%
- Against Personal Beliefs - 23%
- Excessive Brand Requirements - 15%
- Worried about Reader Reaction - 14%
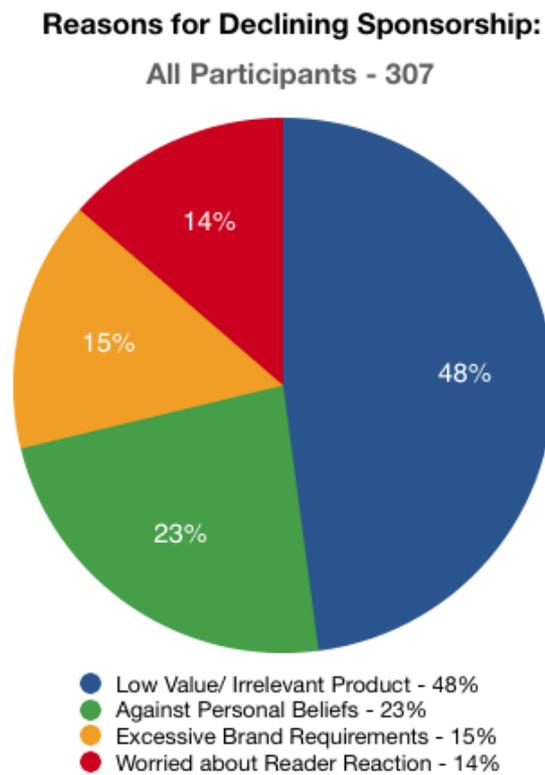
Figure 4.16 Reasons for declining sponsorship: results for each group:

Reason for declining sponsorship:
Active Younger Bloggers

- Low Value/ Irrelevant Product - 51%
- Against Personal Beliefs - 25%
- Excessive Brand Requirements - 15%
- Worried about Reader Reaction - 9%

Reason for declining sponsorship:
Active Older Bloggers

- Low Value/ Irrelevant Product - 44%
- Against Personal Beliefs - 15%
- Excessive Brand Requirements - 13%
- Worried about Reader Reaction - 28%

Reason for declining sponsorship:
Inactive Bloggers

- Low Value/ Irrelevant Product - 39%
- Against Personal Beliefs - 29%
- Excessive Brand Requirements - 19%
- Worried about Reader Reaction - 13%

Of the 25% of responses that had never included sponsorship on their blog, a small percentage [9%] had been offered sponsored material/compensation from a commercial source but had refused the offer for various reasons. Analysis

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

identified four main reasons for this refusal: the sponsorship went against personal blogging beliefs, the brand made excessive stylistic and content demands, the sponsored material did not match the blog style or identity, and the feeling that adopting sponsored material would generate negative responses from blog readers. These findings are similar to factors also identified by Doyle *et al* (2012), Ranga and Sharma (2014) and Magno (2017) when investigating the general blogosphere. Responses from this small percentage of respondents often signalled an implicit message that they were unhappy about adapting their blog style. Many in the group made comments that emphasised their unwillingness to compromise with commercial sponsors, and this Active Younger blogger typified their frank and determined reluctance to modify their output simply to gain free products: *"I'm not willing to change who I am, what I believe in and what I'm passionate about, just so that I can tell folk online I got something for free, I'm not interested in that in the slightest".*

However, respondents in this group, such as this 27-year-old Active Younger blogger, also indicated that their unwillingness to use sponsored material stemmed from their refusal to compromise various standpoints that contributed to their view of themselves as ethical bloggers: *"I no longer promote any fast fashion brands, I want to be seen as an ethical fashionista and I cannot be seen to be promoting unethical practices, nor do I want to either"*. These blogging decisions based upon ethical principles were not just restricted to remarks about aspects of the fashion blogosphere, but also included information about the standpoint of respondents towards wider contemporary moral issues. Thus one 56-year-old Active Older blogger expressed her concern about including promotional material about diet products: *"I have been asked to promote slimming pills and diet products and that is not okay, that completely and utterly goes against my personal beliefs, it's unhealthy and dangerous"* whilst a 57-year-old member of this group stressed her refusal to promote companies involved in unethical use of animals: *"I am completely against animal testing so I automatically avoid any brand associated with this, I don't want any part of that"*.

Respondents who were opposed to the idea of sponsorship in principle tended to be strongly against it. They frequently expressed the view that it was something

that they would not at all accept, as they did not wish to compromise their *"blog integrity"*, a position also observed by Marwick (2013), Hwang and Jeong (2016), Kim, Seely and Jung (2017) and Koivisto (2019). These research participants frequently blogged about social responsibility messages and issues relating to ethical consumerism. As a result, they especially valued their role as honest spokespersons and role models, as this 26-year-old Active Younger blogger emphasised: *"I stopped accepting sponsorship in 2018, as I feel quite strongly about fashion consumption and the damage on the planet. I'm trying to be as sustainable as possible, and I'm careful with what I promote to my readers"*.

Another common reason for refusing to feature sponsored products was that they were often perceived to be of low-quality and/or irrelevant to the focus of the blog. Almost half of participants from across all three groups [48%], including those that had previously accepted sponsorship on their blog, described how they had returned or refused to accept inappropriate or unwanted sponsored material. The most commonly cited reason for this was the fact that they had been asked to feature products which did not appeal to them personally because they were either low-quality or irrelevant to their needs and interests, or both. Many respondents also felt that these products were likely to be of little interest to their readers simply because they were a wholly inappropriate form of content for their blog and for their readership, as especially noted by this 27-year-old Active Younger blogger: *"I was approached by a company that wanted to give me free tyres for my car… I have never spoken about cars in my life, and it just didn't make any sense, my readers would have thought it so random"*. One 65-year-old Active Older blogger referred to the uneasiness she experienced when asked to promote personal hygiene products, in part because of personal reticence and a concern that her readers might take offence: *"I was asked to promote incontinence pads, and yes it's a great product, but I am just not going to do it, I did not want to talk about it. I thought some of my readers might be insulted if I insinuated that they might need it too"*. Some respondents also referred to sponsorship offers that were likely to be of only marginal interest to their readers, such as steel-toe capped work boots, or products which seemed to be overtly inappropriate and which might potentially damage their credibility, as evidenced by this 25-year-old Inactive blogger: *"A company wanted to send me a free*

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mattress which I initially thought was great, but the more I thought about it, I realised how random it would look on my fashion based blog, it would stick out like a sore thumb and my readers would know that I was only posting about it because I got it free, I decided to turn that one down". As these quotes above indicate, it is clear these respondents valued maintaining their authentic voice and the trust of their following above the personal acquisition of these random, non-fashion goods.

4.4.8 Theme two discussion: sponsorship on blogs

The research findings suggest that a generally positive consensus towards sponsorship exists amongst fashion bloggers. The majority of respondents [75%] said that they were in favour of sponsorship but often with the qualifications that sponsored material must match the tone, style and theme of a blog, and must similarly correspond with the interests of both the blogger and her readers. Many bloggers viewed the inclusion of sponsorship as a positive development that had helped them to grow their blog in terms of popularity, increased readership numbers and greater recognition in the sector. They were therefore generally welcoming of sponsorship and the impact that it could have on their online 'reputation and reach'.

The most frequent type of sponsored material to be featured on respondents' blogs was branded sponsored posts. Respondents often commented that this type of sponsorship made it easier to make content seem more realistic, personal and appealing to their readership. 'Sponsored conversations' in which bloggers are able to describe their own feelings about the pros and cons of a product, and involve readers in a discussion about these, were often seen as a suitable, congenial way to include and comment upon gifted product (Dou *et al* 2012; Borah, 2015). When using this approach, fashion bloggers also felt able to retain a greater degree of control over their content, style and appearance. This relates to Marwick (2013), Duffy (2017) and McRae (2017), who found that bloggers who discuss sponsored products in a manner that was in keeping with the natural, conversational style of their blog, tended to be perceived as more trustworthy and less likely to use deceptive marketing tactics towards readers.

By contrast, many respondents indicated that they were less comfortable using forms of blog sponsorship that were seen as intrusive, such as affiliate, pop-up and banner adverts. Bloggers in all three groups of the study tended to avoid these types of material on the grounds that they were unattractive, annoying, spam-like forms of advertising that did not fit their blog tone and often interrupted their 'blog atmosphere'. This relates to the findings of Ouyang (2015), Ferreira *et al* (2017) and Mutum *et al,* (2018), who argue that these forms of online

advertising are likely to be perceived as distracting: the unexpected appearance of a pop-up advert can be particularly off-putting for blog readers and can cause 'blog goal impediment' (Hahn and Lee, 2014). The respondent comments in this study also correlate to similar remarks found in studies which investigated the use of pop-up and spam-like advertising on more traditional channels such as television and radio (Smith, 2007; Kelly, Kerr and Drennan, 2010; Nettelhorst, Jeter and Brannon, 2014).

A number of respondents [10%] identified another, quite different approach to incorporating sponsored material in their blog, which they felt met their aims as fashion bloggers and could be particularly beneficial for their, often local, readers. This entailed building long-term relationships with smaller, local companies that were well-known and well established within their own community. As noted by Rugova and Prenaj (2016) and Sudha and Sheena (2017), general bloggers were often keen to help businesses that they had come to know, like and trust through their own immediate social channels. They took the view that using their blog in this way brought potential mutual benefits: co-operating with local businesses supported their own local economy but could possibly benefit the blogger in the longer term by helping to gain the wider attention of other, larger companies and secure further sponsorship.

Research participants across all three groups also agreed that the inclusion of sponsorship could help to enhance a blogger's position, credibility and legitimacy within the fashion blogosphere. Over a third of all respondents saw the inclusion of sponsorship as a symbol of 'real success', as evidence of their skills in blogging, and as a welcome form of recognition of their commitment and hard work. This corresponds with the work of Banet-Weiser (2012), Fisher (2018) and Faleatua (2018), who found that commercial collaborations generally strengthened the overall credibility, trustworthiness and expertise of fashion bloggers in the eyes of their readership.

By contrast, however, a significant minority of participants [15%] expressed differing degrees of concern about incorporating sponsored material in their blog. Some of these respondents expressed initial feelings of hesitancy and wariness

about becoming involved in sponsorship, a cautious response also recorded by Riboni (2017) and Safitri (2017). These study participants were concerned about the possible impact this development could have upon key elements of their blogging practice, such as quality and suitability of content. Other comments referred to possible detrimental consequences upon their relationship with their readers and the overall impact upon their blog credibility/ authenticity. Several respondents commented on the new challenges that they faced as a result of being recruited to a more professional level of marketing. This reticent response to sponsorship opportunities was noted by Shiau (2014), who observed that practitioners in the general blogsphere could often feel both flattered and anxious if they were selected as a marketing channel by a major company. These anxieties were also recorded by Haley *et al* (2014) and Hanusch, Banjac and Maares (2019), who suggested that they stemmed in part from the fact that the blogosphere was a relatively new and untested advertising medium. The wariness and tension experienced by some bloggers and blog readers was possibly a response to the rapid changes in the atmosphere of the fashion blogosphere due its on-going commercialisation.

A distinct minority of participants expressed relatively little or no interest in incorporating sponsored material in their blogs, nor did they measure their success as a blogger in commercial terms. When reflecting upon the ways in which their blogging activity had developed, these respondents clearly continued to describe their progress as a fashion blogger in terms of personal satisfaction and evidence of reader engagement with their content, that is by using the language of early communitarian blog motivations referred to in Theme One. Hall (2017) observed that bloggers who invest time and effort in engaging with readers by offering helpful advice and useful content continue to feel that they are performing a useful role, while Pittman (2015) and Panchal and Cassidy (2018) also noted that bloggers who measure their success in terms of personal satisfaction through their blog content often experience a higher sense of fulfilment and reward.

Overall, the majority of research participants who either refused or expressed strong concerns about including sponsored material in their blogs were bloggers

who felt that the offered products were incompatible with their existing blog identity and standards/ values. Their comments often referred to an unwillingness to compromise their credibility and dilute the trust they felt they shared with their readership by accepting material that was 'low quality' and/ or of little value, or which was irrelevant to their general blog content, themes and style, such as the non-fashion inappropriate items mentioned above, a point also observed by Wei and Lu (2013) and Kim, Seely and Jung (2017).

The type of sponsor and their product also clearly mattered to the respondents in the 'accepting' group of 75%. When asked to elaborate on the main reason why they initially incorporated sponsored material in their output, many respondents [13%] indicated that they specifically liked the particular brand that had offered them compensation, usually in the form of their products, and knew that these would be of similar interest to readers. These respondent comments agreed with the observations of McCormick and Livett (2012), Hunter (2015) and Eisend *et al* (2020), who argued that bloggers can be more accepting of sponsorship when it is offered by a high-profile brand. Bloggers in this group were especially interested in sponsorship offers from reputable brands with high levels of recognition and credibility as they believed that this would increase reader trust in their own blog output, a point also suggested by Perse and Lambe (2016) and Glucksman (2017).

Many participants from all three study groups referred to the criteria that they adopted when making decisions about their own approach to incorporating sponsored material. Principal among these was the importance of ensuring that the selected brand/ product was 'a good match' for their blog. A significant minority [19%] expressed the view that satisfying this criterion was an essential factor in their sponsorship decisions: they would only feature fashion clothing and accessories that were clearly in line with their blog aims, main themes and personal style. Their comments made it clear that they were aware of the importance of effective blogger/brand/product match, understood that it was best practice, and that they were therefore willing on occasion to refuse sponsorship on these grounds. These respondents were unwilling to trade their blog integrity and change the tone and style of their output unconditionally, simply in return for the commercial advantage offered by sponsorship. Even bloggers who had a long

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

track record of authenticity could risk being labelled as disingenuous and untrustworthy if they continued to feature inappropriate products. In contrast, when brands and products were seen to be genuinely engaged with and used regularly by the blogger beyond an initial sponsored post, such content was more likely to be met with approval by blog readers (Wang and Skovira, 2017; Serazio, 2017). This correlates with the findings of Williams (2019) and Wellman *et al* (2020), who noted that, despite the commercialisation of the blogosphere, a blogger's own sense of transparency and authenticity in terms of 'traditional blogosphere values' still influenced their decisions when it came to commercial collaborations. However, the fact that the study respondents made very few references to serious mismatches between blog purpose and offered sponsorship material suggests that this was a relatively infrequent occurrence. This may be because brands themselves are taking care to identify the more relevant bloggers with which to work and that they themselves appreciate the importance of 'fit relevance' (Breves *et al*, 2020). Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that some bloggers have relatively broad views on what is suitable for their blog and what may interest their readers and are therefore more able to convince themselves to accept material which at first sight is marginal to their core range of products.

A number of researchers, Thoms (2013), Lu, Chang and Chang (2014), Williams and Hodges (2016) and Montecchi and Nobbs (2017), have suggested specific criteria that characterise effective blog sponsorship. These include: a well-targeted match between blogger and brand; a writing style and tone of voice that is sympathetic to the brand identity; a reliable blog context that followers perceive as knowledgeable and trustworthy and that the commercial nature of the relationship between blogger and sponsor is made consistently transparent. These themes of trustworthiness and transparency informed a large number of comments from participants. It is clear that many bloggers care deeply about the way in which they are regarded by their readership and that many have reflected carefully on the possible impact of sponsorship on how they are perceived. This was best typified by one Active Younger blogger who was concerned by the increasingly commercialised sales-pitch tone of her output and who recognised the importance of remediating this quickly.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

A large minority of participants drawn from across all three groups [43%] stressed the importance of being honest at all times when reviewing sponsored products. In their view, failure to disclose their own commercial benefits from blogging might have an impact on their integrity and trustworthiness as perceived by their readership. This chimes with Metzger (2007), Wei and Lu (2013) and Neal (2017), who suggested that bloggers should strive to be as honest and truthful with readers as possible, so as not to dilute their blog credibility and risk weakening their readership numbers.

However, a large number of respondents [57%] admitted that they had not always been openly honest about specific pieces of sponsored content: they had not always disclosed the sponsored nature of material in their postings. Some of the participants in this group defended this behaviour by referring to their reluctance to miss out on commercial opportunities, as noted by Halvorsen *et al* (2013), Hänninen (2016) and Thakur (2018), who suggested that some bloggers might still accept and promote products they personally disliked in order to hopefully secure future collaborations. The present study confirms that many bloggers place a higher premium upon securing sponsorship deals, than on maintaining the authenticity of the information and expertise that they provide to their readership. This resonates with the work of William and Hodges (2016), Abidin (2016) and Esteban-Santos *et al* (2018), who suggest that some bloggers will accept and feature items which are clearly sponsored but not always consistent with the blog's natural tone and history. They are happy to do so despite these items being easily discernible by the blog audience and therefore potentially raising doubts about the validity and honesty of the blogger.

Nevertheless, respondent comments indicated that a significant number of bloggers [89%] who are offered sponsored items that they do not themselves use or like, continue to be very reluctant to feature such items on their blog. In many cases this reflected their desire to maintain a positive spirit throughout their blog output. Reviewing a disliked product would require them to post a product review that would be negative and critical in tone. This finding corresponds with Hautz *et al* (2014), Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) and Wellman *et al* (2020), who found general bloggers were often keen to maintain a positive online atmosphere and

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink** Active Older Bloggers: **Green** Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

preferred not to post any negative information or critical opinion about a company/ product. A large number of respondents from within each participant group commented that, instead of posting critical product reviews, they would instead prefer to resolve issues of this type by private discussion with the commercial source. Others admitted that they often simply preferred to ignore the product and therefore not post content, despite running the risk of damaging their future relationship with the sponsor. Respondents who acted in this way frequently stated that their priority was maintaining overall blog credibility and reader trust, although it could be argued that this was an evasive solution to a problem that clearly troubled many fashion bloggers.

The consequences of blogger reluctance to post negative reviews and their decision to only offer positive opinions was further explored by Sprague and Wells (2010), Wang and Chien (2012), Kottke (2014) and Kim *et al* (2020). These researchers have argued that bloggers who post negative product reviews can in fact be perceived as more trustworthy and credible by their readership. Yang *et al* (2019) also noted that consumers can derive value from negative reviews and therefore felt that bloggers should be more willing to explore the positive effects of posting them. Maintaining a balance of both positive and negative elements in blog posts may promote greater reader trust and, over the long term, greater connection and loyalty to the blogger. Pihl (2013b) and Al-Saleh (2017) argue that bloggers with greater numbers of readers and longer experience of posting sponsored material in their blog output tend to be more likely to share negative and critical opinion about products and brands with their online following. This may be because they feel that they have built and developed a sufficiently strong reputation and a secure sense of connection with their readers over time, and they feel that they are consistently perceived as a trusted source of opinion. This also confirms the work of Cane (2017) and Stubb and Colliander (2019), who argue that sponsored content is generally more accepted and effective when it comes from a source that has already established a high level of perceived trustworthiness.

Overall, many fashion bloggers continue to be critical about products they do not like. However, the overwhelming majority of participants in this particular study

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

took a radically different position and were reluctant to be controversial. This was the case across all age groups. These respondents offered a number of reasons that justified their decisions to avoid being openly critical of sponsored products. These included not wishing to upset the sponsor by posting impolite comments, arguing that readers might in fact be interested in a product that they themselves disliked, and wanting to maintain an overall positive tone in the belief that overt negativity is off-putting to both readers and sponsors alike.

This reluctance of bloggers to be negative may result from more complex motivations than the simple eagerness to attract free products from brands. It may often reflect a longer-term future ambition to develop their blog into a sustainable, lucrative business. These bloggers clearly appreciate the importance of strengthening rather than risking their connection with brands. For these participants, working with, or at least not alienating, the client brand has become more important than offering an honest review to readers. This development may be more marked within fashion blogging than in other, less commercial, parts of the general blogosphere. A reason for this may be the relative ease with which companies can enlist fashion-blogger help in their promotional activities, thereby encouraging the blogger to view themselves as almost business partners performing a customer-service role, paid by receipt of fashion items. A further reason for the reluctance of study participants to voice their criticisms may result from the fact that they all had a relatively small-scale following and may have lacked the confidence to risk alienating their cooperating brands.

Therefore, in response to Research Question Two [has the inclusion of sponsored content changed the content and style of the fashion blog? If so, in what ways and to what extent has this affected blogger self-perceptions?], the findings of this study show that some bloggers have admitted that they have occasionally diluted their authentic approach to reviewing items, and that they have felt under considerable pressure to maintain positive relationships with brands.

Nevertheless, this does not apply to all research respondents that took part in this specific study. A small minority [11%] continued to stress the importance of writing critical reviews that were negative about products. These participants

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

tended to be less interested in transforming their blog into a business and clearly saw fashion blogging as still being a hobby for them. A number of participants also indicated that they have refused sponsorship for numerous reasons, notably when sponsorship has gone against personal, ethical beliefs, has required excessive changes to the tone of the blog, has failed to meet the blogger's standards in terms of blog/brand match, or was perceived as potentially damaging to blogger-reader relations. In this regard, many respondents stressed the importance that they placed upon their unwillingness to adapt their blog content and style in ways that might be needed for the sponsorship to be successful. This relates to the work of Marwick, (2013), Ranga and Sharma (2014), Hwang and Jeong (2016), Magno (2017) and Koivisto (2019), who found that a significant number of bloggers within the fashion blogosphere continue to feel uncomfortable about compromising blog integrity, personal values and standards and their role as an honest blogging spokesperson in exchange for commercial involvement. Hahn and Lee (2014) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020) found that refusing to influence their readers by posting irrelevant product material was beneficial for individual blog credibility over time. Hall (2017) argues that continual engagement with readers in relation to blog content can allow bloggers to feel 'successful', as they are performing a useful role in offering helpful advice and content. Whilst reflecting on the way in which their blogging activity has developed, a significant number of participants clearly continue to identify personal satisfaction and reader engagement with content as equally strong measures of success when it comes to blogging. This links to the communitarian blog motivations discussed in Theme One.

4.5 Theme Three: Pressure

Respondents were asked if they had ever experienced pressure from a brand. Supplementary questions gave them an opportunity to discuss the different ways in which they felt pressurised by sponsoring companies, and/or their experience of the impact of self-induced pressure.

Figure 4.17 Pressure from a brand: all respondent responses:

Have you experienced pressure from a brand?
All Participants - 307

- Yes - 78%
- No - 22%
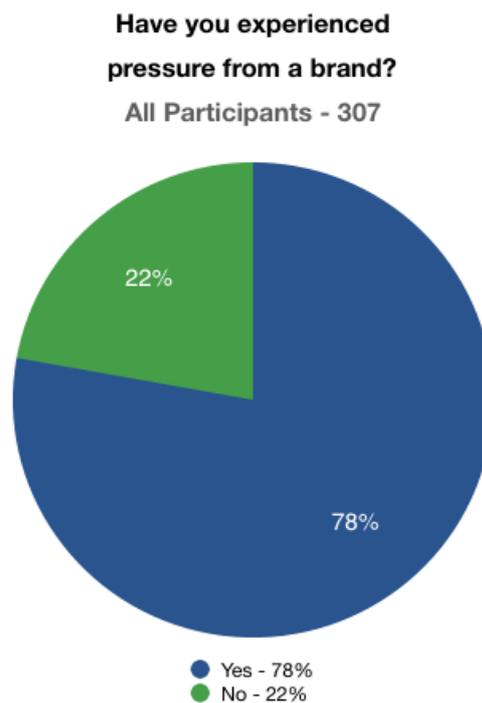
Figure 4.18 Pressure from a brand: results for each group:

Have you experienced pressure from a brand?
Active Younger Bloggers

- Yes - 83%
- No - 17%

Have you experienced pressure from a brand?
Active Older Bloggers

- Yes - 64%
- No - 36%

Have you experienced pressure from a brand?
Inactive Bloggers

- Yes - 65%
- No - 35%

Helen Dargie

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

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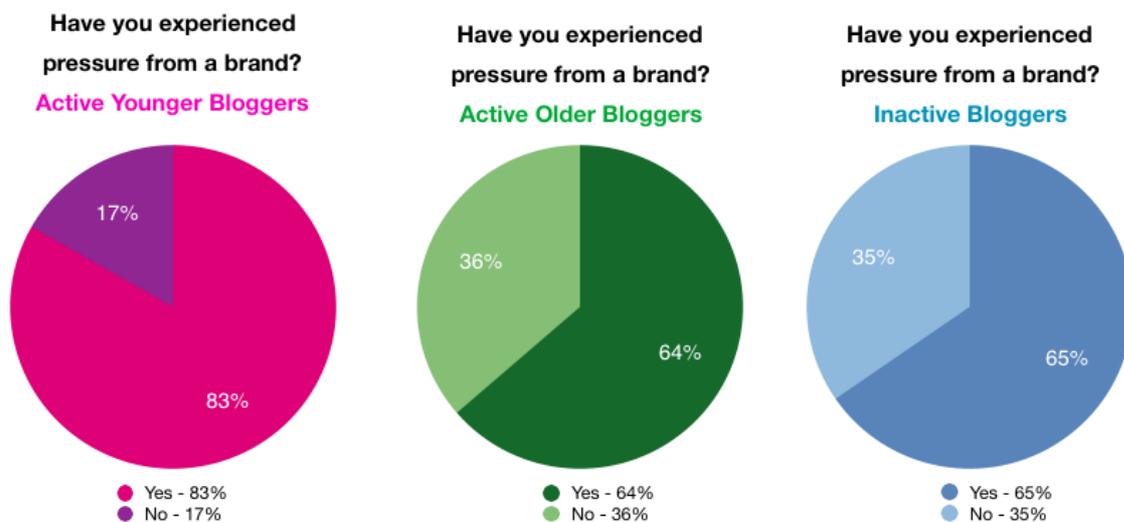
A considerable majority of respondents in all three groups admitted that, when collaborating with brands, they had experienced the various forms of external and internal pressure that are described and discussed below. Participants in the Active Younger blogger group reported the highest level of pressure [83%] but the other two groups indicated that they had also experienced a significant degree of pressure [64% and 65%]. When answering previous questions, Active Younger bloggers have tended to identify themselves as being the most commercially focused of the three groups in the study and therefore their particularly high response to the question may be a reflection of their greater ambition to develop their blog in a more commercialised direction.

Across all three participant groups, only a relatively small minority of respondents [22%] indicated that they had not experienced pressure from brands in this respect. These fashion bloggers welcomed and enjoyed the opportunity to work with brands, often emphasising in detail how their commercial collaborations were conducted in a friendly, co-operative manner: *"No, I have never felt any pressure when working with brands, I've always found them to be really professional and friendly"*. A number of these respondents also noted that they had enjoyed consistently positive experiences with sponsoring companies over a considerable period of time. Typical were the comments of a 68-year-old Active Older blogger who phrased her comments in a way that stressed that her cooperation with and from sponsors had been consistently, highly positive: *"I have always really enjoyed working with companies on my blog, I haven't ever had any negative experiences"*. Many of these participants also went on to reiterate comments expressed in the previous section e.g. that sponsorship was a wholly beneficial opportunity that they may not have received otherwise, that they were happy to develop their blog in this way, and that they welcomed the opportunity to make some money from their blog: *"It's been a great experience for me and my blog"* and *"It's been really exciting as I didn't think it would be possible for me"*. This high level of positivity towards sponsorship was also found by Hall (2017) and Mutum *et al* (2018).

Helen Dargie

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

However, a clear majority of respondents [78%] did indicate that they had experienced pressure as a result of commercial involvement. Their comments suggested that they felt three main types of pressure: pressure from commercial partners, self-induced pressure, and pressure from other bloggers.

When describing pressure from commercial partners, respondents indicated several ways in which they felt this was exerted. Primary amongst these was the pressure felt when asked by the sponsor to include and/or to alter specific comments on product content in their blog. Frequently, respondents said that they felt that these requests were effectively unavoidable and took the form of a dictated command: *"I've had brands wanting to write the content themselves, and simply ask me to copy and paste what they want me to say, so like prewritten stuff"*. Others had experienced the pressure that came from being required to review and include company-written material about sponsored products within a very short time scale. Often this copy did not suit their own schedule and allowed the blogger little opportunity to research and reflect. This left them feeling that they had lost ownership of their own blog to some extent, making them feel that their blogging was now a chore which they had to complete under pressure: *"Brands will sometimes set really tight deadlines, like write a blog post 24 hours after receiving the item and that's really difficult and stressful to do"*. A number of participants expressed their discontent at the way in which brands would often impose criteria and guidelines which not only affected the content and the appearance of the blog post, but fundamentally undermined their sense of authorial control and independence: *"Sometimes brands will outline set criteria that you need to follow, and they will get really angry if you don't follow their guidelines. A lot of the time it's like X amount of blog posts and Instagram stories, and you have to make sure you post on the specific dates and times that they ask for, and use specific keywords and hashtags, it can be really intense"*. Other participants within both the Active Younger and Active Older groups admitted to feeling concerned and tense if they felt they were not meeting these set requirements. As indicated in the quote directly above, some respondents reported instances of companies directly exerting managerial pressure over them, which many felt to be oppressive.

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Many respondents also referred to the self-induced pressure that could often develop from their reluctance to disappoint a sponsor that they admired and/or enjoyed working with, as one 22-year-old Active Younger blogger described: *"It can be really stressful because you don't want to anger them, particularly when it's a brand you really love and admire"*. These feelings were particularly noticeable in comments made by members of the Active Younger blogger group, the most commercially ambitious of the three study groups and the one most sensitive to sponsor requirements. However, a number of older participants also expressed similar concerns. Their apprehensions often tended to be primarily self-induced, expressed in comments that emphasised their own personal desire to perform as professionally as possible, as stated by this 65-year-old: *"Oh yes, there is a lot of pressure to do good, I want to do as best a job as possible for the brand"*. Some respondents also indicated that the need to liaise regularly with the sponsoring company in order to satisfactorily meet technical criteria, overall blog guidelines and expected deadlines, led to pressures of its own. The feeling of insecurity that this induced in some bloggers was well expressed by this 53-year-old: *"I feel pressure that I have to make my photos really good, and I constantly check in with the brand to make sure they like it and are happy with it"*.

In addition, some participants across all three groups revealed that pressure could also be felt when sponsors provided very little technical information about standards and timelines, and/or were unclear in helping the blogger understand how they were expected to select and present their material: *"There have been a few cases when brands haven't made it clear what the collaboration expectations are"* and *"I could feel more pressure when a brand didn't give any guidelines, I never knew what they wanted from me and I found that more stressful"*. The following participants also described the particular stress that they felt when brands suddenly required additional work and/or demanded unexpected changes to the project at very short notice: *"It's stressful when brands ask for more than seems reasonable, or they add extra clauses, like extra work"* and *"I'm working with a company at the moment, and they keep changing content deadlines and they are asking for additional work that is not in the original contract that I agreed to"*. This 26-year-old Active Younger blogger went on to admit that she wished

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

she had not agreed to collaborate with a particular brand due to the excessive pressure that she felt had been exerted upon her: *"It's getting to the point where I wish I hadn't accepted this campaign"*.

Significantly, a small number of participants within the Active Younger blogger group [17%] also reported being pressurised by companies to keep the sponsored nature of material reviewed in their blog hidden from their readership. One 26-year-old reported that: *"Over the years, I've actually had companies ask me to not reveal that certain blog posts have been sponsored"*. She admitted that initially she had complied with their demands and had not disclosed her own financial interest in featuring these items in her posts. By doing so, she was in breach of the Advertising Standard Agency guidelines that apply to the relationships between bloggers and sponsoring companies. After reflection, she later decided to amend the post and to inform her readership that the material was sponsored. In her study response, she indicated that this decision was a personal, moral one and that she acted from a sense of fairness towards her following. She felt that she had to be more open with her followers. She was therefore keen to re-establish and maintain her authentic voice as an honest blogger, rather than acting from any detailed awareness of ASA regulations.

However, other respondents from across all three groups reported an additional, more pervasive and demanding form of indirect pressure that resulted from their acceptance of sponsorship in their blog. This stemmed from their feeling that they felt it was now necessary to devote much more time, thought, energy and resources to planning and presenting sponsored material than was the case with their usual non-commercial blog output. Parallel with this was an increased sense that their commercial postings would be under more intense scrutiny from both readers and sponsors because money was involved. Similar tensions have been observed by Schmierbach and Oeldorf-Hirsch (2012) and Petersen (2014) in other parts of the global blogosphere.

Helen Dargie

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.5.1 Professional standards

A significant number of participants from across all three groups [39%] revealed that, by accepting sponsored material from commercial companies, they felt under increased pressure to meet higher, ever-more professional standards of content presentation: *"I feel pressure to make sure everything looks perfect on the blog"*. They especially referred to the particular pressure to present and invest in more professional web design, especially as regards the photographic and other visual forms of content. The following comments by Active Younger and Older bloggers alike demonstrate the extent to which participants across the age profile felt they needed to professionalise their activity and output in order to meet higher standards: *"I went out and bought a DSLR camera so that I could get better imagery for my blog"*, *"I bought myself a professional camera and a ring light and a tripod"* and *"I hired a web designer to create a very professional website for me"*. This last comment hinted at a sense of technical insecurity which many study participants seemed to share. Nearly half [46%] spoke about the pressure to identify and contact other individuals with relevant technical skills and experience who could help them reach the level of professionalism that they felt was now required. Other respondents also admitted to outsourcing the visual elements of their output to photographers who could provide them with a much higher level of quality outfit images: *"I used to work with a professional photographer for outfit shoots, I felt like that was what I needed to reflect the quality of the content that I was putting together"*. These comments point to the widespread shift across the social media in recent years from the textual to the visual. These respondents fully understood that high-level visual skills were now a necessary part of 'effective' fashion blogging: *"I always try and work with photographers if I can for my outfit posts, it's always more professional"*.

A smaller number of participants from across all three groups [10%] also described other strategies that they had adopted to deal with the increased sense of insecurity that they felt once they had begun to accept sponsorship. These strategies included attending professional courses on online elements such as search engine optimisation (SEO) and website design in order to enhance their overall understanding of the digital environment. Thus, one 28-year-old Active

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Younger blogger reported: *"I've actually also gone on a business course to learn about SEO for my blog, because I want to make sure I'm doing this properly"* and one 57-year-old Active Older blogger had also taken steps to increase her technical capability: *"I went on a WordPress and a photography course so that I could improve my blogging skills"*. Both of these comments demonstrate the awareness of many bloggers in all age groups of the need to continually improve and update their personal digital expertise and knowledge, a trend noticed elsewhere by Pedroni (2015).

A third of all research participants [32%] also offered a range of comments about this need to continually enhance their skills as a fashion blogger. Some considered that this was not necessarily something that they would have done, had it not been for the commercial involvement and interest in their blog. One 28-year-old Inactive participant who stopped blogging in 2019, looked back in a particularly rueful manner when she reflected on the high levels of stress that she had inflicted upon herself: *"It does seem silly now when you think about it, the amount of stress I would give myself over the quality of my blog posts and pictures and stuff"*. A number of these participants were acutely aware that they lacked the level of skill, resources and in some cases motivation to reach what they considered to be the very high professional standards that were now required for success in commercial fashion blogging. Some openly acknowledged that they did not have the required technical skills and felt that these were now becoming increasingly unattainable: *"I can't do that, I will never reach that level… it's just me and my tripod"*. Some took the view that there was now a widening gap between being a hobbyist and being a professional blogger. In a number of cases, respondents accepted that they were not sufficiently motivated to make that leap: *"That's not me, I've never seen myself as being professional, I'm still on the level of a few others that are really just hobbyists"*. Others simply admitted that they did not believe themselves to be capable of attaining the technical standards now required: *"Well, it got to a point where I just knew I couldn't compete with those big professional bloggers, I knew I couldn't get to that level".*

By contrast, some participants [18%], particularly drawn from the Active Younger blogger group, fully accepted that a heightened level of professionalism was an

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

understandable and completely necessary requirement in order to reach and maintain 'success standards' in the contemporary fashion blogosphere. This comment by an Active Younger blogger implicitly appreciated that blogging had moved on from its original, relatively rudimentary technical requirements: *"If you decide to start a blog, you need to accept that the standard is a lot higher these days"*. Successful blogging now entailed considerable personal investment in skills and equipment in order to be able to meet the higher standards of presentation required, not just from sponsors, but from a changing readership that had higher expectations: *"I have started a YouTube channel and I bought a new vlogging camera, I opted to get a MacBook Pro and it all cost me a fortune but I knew that people will not watch poor quality videos"* and *"If you want to be taken seriously and turn this into your job, you need to seriously invest in technology and equipment, and learn how to do it properly and professionally so that you can be taken seriously and brands will be interested in working with you"*.

Some of these younger respondents commented on the potential negative implications of this quest for higher production values in order to meet ever-changing reader expectations. They felt that raising their own production values was an inevitable response to the way in which the blogosphere was developing: *"Unfortunately there is a need for high quality content as people will just not accept a lower level anymore"*. However, some respondents acknowledged that higher professional standards might exclude bloggers who were unable to invest the time and money required to 'keep up', and they were aware of the social and economic consequences of this: *"I think this does make it less accessible to people now"*. This respondent was conscious that professionalisation was bringing about changes in the type of person who would be able to participate in high-level blogging but perceived this change as inevitable: *"I know that this isn't great, but I suppose it's just the way blogging has grown and developed"*.

This sense that changes in fashion blogging were inevitable also influenced the views of other research participants [34%], drawn mainly from within the Active Younger and Older blogger groups. In their comments, these respondents fully accepted that they had entered into business relationships with sponsors and that their duty as a *"professional blogger"* was to promote items as well as they could,

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

regardless of their own personal views. Their justifications frequently stressed the obligation that they felt to act as if they were almost in an official contract with the sponsor: *"If you are going to choose to work with a company, you should try to be as professional as possible. I always want to do my best for the brand and make sure they are happy with my content, I think it's only right"*. Thus, one 27-year-old Active Younger blogger went on to describe her blogging activities as being similar in almost all respects to a professional marketing agency. She stated her position in a very frank statement: *"Blogging has become a business and I think some people need to treat it as such. You don't have to like every single product that you are sent. In marketing, lots of agencies will promote things that they don't like or don't believe in, and that's how I see it too"*. This respondent's comment above is clearly aligned with the thoughts and values expressed in the previous Theme, which also describes the shift from hobbyist to a more business-led transactional approach to blogging.

Nevertheless, when asked to comment in greater depth upon pressures that resulted from involvement with brands, a significant number of all respondents [44%] still maintained that they did not feel that sponsorship had imposed any particularly unrealistic or oppressive obligations on their blogging practice. Members of this group often expressed their view that they remained wholly in control of their blog whether they accepted sponsorship or not. The comments made by these Active Older bloggers emphasised their sense of continuing independence but also referred to the benefits that ensued, such as the excitement of working with favourite companies, the educational development that collaborations could bring and the sense of being in some way a special member of the fashion blogosphere: *"I haven't felt any pressure at all. It's always been a delight and quite a thrilling experience to work with some of my favourite brands"*, *"the opportunity to work with a number of fashion companies has been a great development for my blog"* and *"I'm still very much in control of my blog content but it's always great to work with some of your favourite brands too, I never thought that I would be doing something like that"*.

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.5.2 Bloggers' advice to brands

Figure 4.19 Bloggers' advice to brands: all 307 respondents:

Advice to Brands:

All Participants - 307

- Blog and Brand Match - 51%
- Blogger's Own Choice - 33%
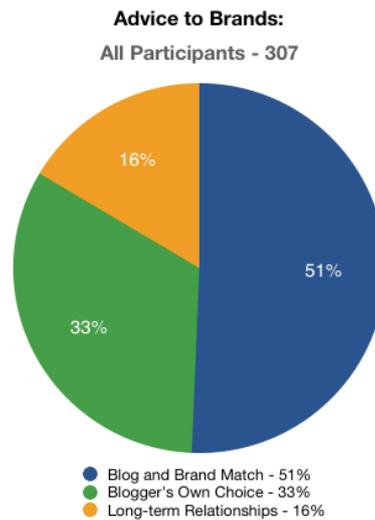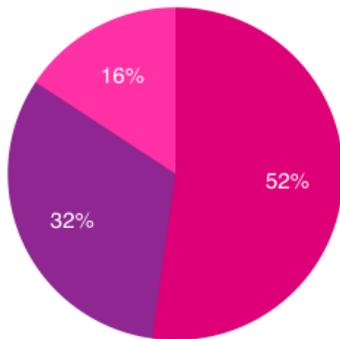- Long-term Relationships - 16%

Figure 4.20 bloggers' advice to brands: results for each group:

What advice, if any, would you give an advertiser who wants to advertise on your blog?

Active Younger Bloggers

- Blog and Brand Match - 52%
- Blogger's Own Choice - 32%
- Long Term Relationships - 16%

What advice, if any, would you give an advertiser who wants to advertise on your blog?

Active Older Bloggers
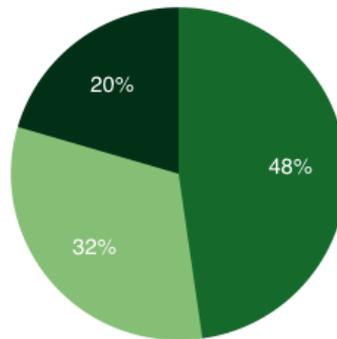
- Blog and Brand Match - 48%
- Blogger's Own Choice - 32%
- Long Term Relationships - 20%

What advice, if any, would you give an advertiser who wants to advertise on your blog?

Inactive Bloggers
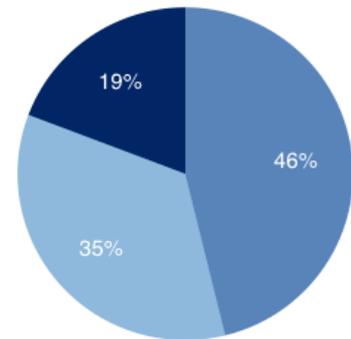
- Blog and Brand Match - 46%
- Blogger Own Choice - 35%
- Long Term Relationships - 19%

Respondents were asked to consider the advice that they would give to an advertiser planning to collaborate with their blog. A number of respondents remarked that this was a question of particular interest to them: over half of respondents across the three groups commented on what they perceived as a lack

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of understanding by many companies when it comes to working with fashion bloggers. Frequently, their remarks suggested that companies needed to inform themselves better about the particular nature of the fashion blogosphere and how to improve their ability to communicate with bloggers: *"I think a lot of companies don't really know how to work with bloggers because it is still such a new form of advertising"*.

There were three main areas of feedback bloggers felt that they would like brands to consider: the importance of blog and brand match, bloggers' own control and independence, and how best to build long-lasting relationships. The first of these, blog and brand match [51%], was identified as the most important by all three groups: *"The important thing to note is that the product and the company must fit with the theme of my blog, which is fashion. There is absolutely no point getting in touch and wanting me to advertise something that is not fashion related"*.

These respondents were well aware that successful blog advertising depends on the product brand fitting in well with the aesthetics, content and tone of their output, as observed by Pihl and Sandström (2011), Lankinen (2014), Esposito *et al* (2017). Sponsored content also had to be relevant to the specific fashion blog readership: *"Brands need to realise that they need to work with bloggers in a way that will be relevant to their own target audience, so that the collaboration doesn't look totally random and out of place"*.

The second most emphasised theme [33%] related to the importance of blogger choice i.e. the importance of ensuring that the fashion blogger maintained independent editorial control. Some respondents expressed the importance of the blogger retaining autonomy: *"It's important that bloggers have complete free-rein on sponsored content and collaborations, they should be able to decide what to choose and how to present it"* and *"I think the best collaborations were the ones where the brand allowed me to choose items myself, this gave me so much from flexibility"*. Several comments also stressed the importance of allowing fashion bloggers to make independent product choices which, as noted previously, had implications for blogger credibility: *"I was able to choose items I would have personally purchased with my own money"*. Other comments also advised

sponsors that they should try to remember the effort that bloggers put into presenting material and that compensation, such as free clothing, should reflect that: *"I think companies can forget how much time and effort goes into creating a blog post, photographing an outfit, editing pictures, etc"* and *"I put so much time and effort into each and every post, it's only fair that companies compensated me for that"*. This finding correlates with the work of Pihl (2013b) and Laurell (2014), who also found that bloggers especially appreciate maintaining a considerable degree of flexible choice when collaborating with brands.

A smaller number of all respondents [16%] also emphasised the importance of building long-lasting relationships with bloggers as a useful piece of advice for sponsors: *"I think brands need to be committed to form relationships with bloggers over a long period of time, I think that's how collaborations can be authentic"*. Respondents in this group also stressed that establishing personal dialogue with the PR staff in companies helped in this respect: *"My favourite collaborations were always with brands that seemed to care about the blogger, I liked the brands that remembered that blogging relies on two-way communication and who were open as to how we should work together"*. A number of both Active Younger and Older bloggers detailed the long-term relationships that they have with specific companies and felt that they had become brand ambassadors working over a number of months in a sustained project, rather than merely showcasing their products in one-off features. These respondents argued that this helps them to offer content in ways that their audience might find more authentic and credible: *"I've seen some bloggers work with the same few brands for a few months now and there is something nice about that, you know it's not just a one-off sponsorship deal, and it piques my interest because I keep being reminded of that brand"* and *"I have loved this collaboration because it shows my readers that I'm not fickle when it comes to clothing. My readers have reacted really well to this too, as it just seems more genuine, which it is"*.

Nevertheless, a small number of respondents within the Active Younger bloggers group [11%] expressed a much more critical point of view that was based on their opinion that some companies were increasingly taking advantage of inexperienced fashion bloggers. They felt that bloggers themselves should become more cautious

when entering into professional partnerships and business deals: *"To other bloggers out there, when signing a contract with a brand, please please please read the small print. Companies and PR agencies are getting cheekier and cheekier these days, asking the blogger to offer the moon and the stars, in exchange for peanuts"*.

Several participants offered comments that showed that they felt a duty of care to other, newer bloggers. They often had very strong feelings about the practices of certain sponsors which they felt amounted to serious abuse of young inexperienced people: *"I think there is such a risk for young girls, or anyone, who doesn't treat it as a business, that goes into gifted and sponsored stuff, because that's when you start to get used and abused by brands and a lot of people maybe wouldn't know how to negotiate with a brand"*. These respondents were aware that there was a need to help younger fashion bloggers who might be at risk from unscrupulous sponsors learn how to resist these overt pressures: *"Brands will try to bully you into posting all kinds of content and promotional messages on their behalf, and I know some folk that do not know how to handle that, and they will just do whatever the brand wants, it's shameful really"*. Bloggers with these concerns argued that there was a need for more oversight and regulation of this corner of the digital world: "*there really needs to be better systems in place to protect bloggers"*.

Comments such as these which expressed concern about the exploitation of new, inexperienced bloggers were made by participants from the Active Younger group. This kind of remark was not documented amongst the other two groups, perhaps signifying their greater experience at handling the pressures of sponsorship or that their experience largely pre-dated the increased prevalence of sponsorship opportunities in recent years.

4.5.3 Personal pressure relating to others within the blogosphere

In addition to commercial pressure from brands, a large majority of participants across the three groups [74%] also discussed the personal pressure, often self-induced, that they experienced when interacting with other fashion bloggers online. This personal insecurity was particularly notable among the Active Younger blogger group, although participants from the other groups also described similar thoughts. In this respect, six respondents in the Active Younger Blogger group made specific reference to feeling pressurised by the quality and professionalism of the output of the most prominent, high-profile fashion bloggers such as Zoella and Victoria McGrath from In the Frow. Their work, and that of similar bloggers who have attracted mainstream-media attention, was also specifically mentioned as a source of pressure by five respondents from the Inactive blogger group.

However, when commenting upon pressure, most respondents did so in the context of comparing their blogging achievements with those of others operating at a similar hobbyist level. They made a number of remarks expressing their sense of relative inadequacy and concern at their inability to continue to compete with the rising standards and expectations within the amateur sector of the blogosphere. One typical comment from a 24-year-old Active Younger blogger explicitly indicated that the pressure that she now felt came from competition with her fellows, rather than from comparison with blogger superstars who were already interconnected with the global fashion industry: *"I feel more pressure from other bloggers than I do from brands. I constantly look at others and think 'my photos are not up to scratch' and not quite cutting it anymore. I do feel that I'm not doing it right and I feel that I should be doing a better job"*. Other respondents who reflected upon the pressures of blogging often made self-evaluative remarks indicating that they felt continual pressure to improve: *"When you look at others and they are so professional, you have to be professional too, in order to keep up"* and *"I always felt that I needed to be doing better"*. These respondents felt that the fashion blogosphere was becoming increasingly competitive even at their amateur level, which consequently made them feel more critical about their own

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

output, a sentiment also documented by Titton (2015), Safitri, (2017) and Eckert (2018).

One example of the competitive pressures felt by bloggers operating at a relatively local hobbyist level was described in detail by Blogger A, a 27-year-old member of the Active Younger group. It involved an incident which generated a degree of animosity with Blogger B who lived in the same city and was known to her. This tension stemmed from a clash of differing personal approaches to blogger values in relation to sponsorship opportunities. Blogger A was approached by a local theatre and asked to provide material for an Instagram post and video story, in return for show tickets. In addition, she also voluntarily promoted the theatre and the show by creating a sequence of supportive posts on her own blog. This extra material was not asked for by the theatre but simply an expression of her own personal interest in the project.

Several months later, Blogger B was also asked to provide the theatre with material about one of its shows. However, the theatre now expected her to create the same degree of supplementary blog material that Blogger A had provided voluntarily. Blogger B refused the offer and she criticised Blogger A: *"They were looking for the same level of content that you had created but because you wrote a blog post afterwards, they are also looking for that from me, and I wasn't willing to give them that, so they declined to give me any tickets"*. Blogger B criticised Blogger A for failing to maintain a perceived solidarity amongst fellow blog writers: *"She said I was setting a bad precedent for other bloggers in the city"*. Blogger B was also angry because Blogger A had raised the expectation bar of the sponsoring theatre: *"She said I shouldn't be doing things above what has been asked because then it just sets the standard too high for everyone else…"*. Blogger A felt aggrieved because she felt she was being pressurised into lowering her own personal standards and that her control over her own blog and content was being questioned: *"I was really taken aback by this. I don't go about my life thinking 'I'm just going to do the bare minimum' and I try to do more than I can. Also, it's not up to anyone else what I do and don't do on my own blog, so I find pressure with that"*. This dispute demonstrates two separate causes of pressure, with one

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

participant feeling pressurised as a result of her high standards and the other because of her unwillingness to compete and meet similar expectations.

Another respondent's anecdote exemplified an even more radical difference of opinion between two local bloggers who both had an opportunity to collaborate with a local business. Blogger C was invited to help a newly established café by sharing pictures of the café, its offering and décor on her blog. Blogger C took particular pride in the high quality of her photography, which she felt was an important tool for reaching a wider audience and was happy to help this new local enterprise by allowing the café to also use her images for free in their promotional materials. Blogger D was also approached by the café for similar help but took a far more commercial position and requested a fee of £100 per photograph. The café was unwilling to pay for something that Blogger C had provided gratis, resulting in a quarrel between the two bloggers. Blogger D attacked Blogger C: *"It all ended very badly, she ended up going nuts at me, saying I shouldn't have done that".* Blogger D was effectively criticising Blogger C for maintaining an amateur, communitarian approach to the request, whereas she herself had taken a strictly monetary viewpoint. Blogger C's defence was more altruistic and in the spirit of the original values of the blogosphere: *"It really doesn't matter to me, it is not my full-time job and I don't see myself as a professional blogger and if it's going to help a local business that I love and I want to see be successful so that it's still here in a few years, then I will do it".*

Although these two anecdotes do not directly relate to issues in the fashion blogosphere, they have been included in the study because they were offered by two participants who were Active Younger fashion bloggers. The conflicts that are narrated in both episodes demonstrate the very different values that motivate different types of bloggers and influence their views on their blogging practice. Both these two incidents might be said to exemplify the shift in values that commentators such as Findlay (2015) and Fortunati, Farinosi and Nie (2017) have identified throughout the development of the blogosphere, from the often idealistic hobbyist, to the more expressly commercial. Underlying both examples is the potential for personal dispute and hostility far removed from the initial friendly,

collegiate interaction of blogging's early years. Both episodes also demonstrate how different perspectives about a particular blogging event can generate a high degree of tension and pressure.

4.5.4 Impact on mental health

A small number of respondents within the Active Younger blogger group [4%] also used the questions in this part of the study as an opportunity to highlight issues relating to mental health, potentially stemming from their own blogging experience. Although no questions in the questionnaire and interview specifically asked for mental-health details, these respondents unexpectedly referred to the impact a combination of self-induced pressure and perceived peer pressure had upon their mental well-being.

Some of their comments illustrate concerns that they felt about their own personal body image as a result of comparing themselves with online photographs of other fashion bloggers. This sense of comparative failure was well expressed by this 25-year-old younger blogger: *"I compare myself to other bloggers out there. I just feel some of my pictures don't quite cut it when I look at others".* Respondents also revealed that they felt they were being judged against unattainable beauty standards similar to those that have traditionally prevailed in the fashion marketing press. This 23-year-old made a very clear statement that expectations relating to her appearance, whether self-induced or imposed externally, were a primary source of the pressure that she feels: *"I feel pressure to fit a certain aesthetic, I feel like there is a flawless criterion that fashion bloggers need to fill"*. Another 26-year-old younger blogger expressed her fear that failing to meet an expected beauty standard in the photographs of herself on her blog was having an impact on her self-confidence and also possibly generating reader hostility towards her: *"I can see how many people have viewed one of my posts and I do think about that, like oh god did they like my outfit, do I look fat? Are they going to be nasty?"*.

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Other Active Young bloggers referred to the excessive time and monetary demands put upon them when trying to present themselves as professionally as possible: *"There is pressure to keep up with trends and post new clothes and content and there is financial stress there too, if I buy new clothes, can I afford to eat that week? There is pressure and it is hard. You can be working really hard and not see anything come from it"*. Underlying this blogger's complaint is the clear sense of her disappointment that her fashion blogging efforts were failing to generate material rewards or even meet the costs incurred in her blog production. One 28-year-old Active Younger blogger, who has been blogging since 2011, felt intense pressure to continually refresh her photographic presentation of herself, and described her strategy for dealing with this difficulty: *"I'm not really proud of this but I will just buy loads of clothes so that I can take outfit photos, and then I just return the clothes, just so that I know I will always have new stuff to show"*. This quote is significant because it indicates that this blogger is aware that the continual pressure to have a fresh wardrobe with which to engage and impress her readers has required her to adopt a practice that was artificial and inauthentic.

This pressure to maintain the image that they portray of themselves in their online blog personae was also well described by a 27-year-old Active Younger blogger who reflected upon the effort and impact of maintaining an artificial illusory self. She referred to the gap between the performance as seen by her readers and the actual reality of being a solitary fashion blogger which can be, in her view, lonely and difficult: *"People look at my social media all the time, particularly people I know from home and they will say 'oh, you're doing so well and you seem really happy' but a lot of the time, I'm not. It's just an aesthetic, and it's just a mask that I put on sometimes, and I think people need to realise that there is a dark side to blogging, and the pressures that bloggers can put on themselves to look and be a certain way"*. The superficial surface appearance of the blog post can obscure much of the underlying pressure that many fashion bloggers feel, a tension also noted by Lunde (2013) and Koivisto (2019). These blogger concerns ominously echo the mental-health demands and consequences that have often been recorded by models working in the traditional fashion industry: *"I continue to be really unhappy with the content I am producing. I do take a step back from*

my blog because I know I don't need to be like this and it's not always good for my mental health, I try to remind myself that I just need to enjoy it". This quote demonstrates that the negative feelings that many fashion bloggers experience can originate in a sense of dissatisfaction with the standard of their blog output. It also shows that this blogger is aware of the need to combat this disillusionment by focusing on the positive benefits that blogging can offer.

Active Younger bloggers also made a number of remarks that illuminated the pressures that are the result of the widening gulf between the values and attitudes of original communitarian blogging and later more monetarised developments. The sharing environment of original blogging, best characterised by the open-diary format, is clearly very different from the atmosphere which permeates much current fashion blogging. Evidence of this is shown by the care which some Active Younger bloggers now feel they need to take when differentiating between those aspects of themselves that they are comfortable to reveal online and those which they decide must remain private: *"I put a lot of pressure on myself and a lot of what goes on behind the scenes, i.e. most of my life, I choose not to share on my blog because life is not peachy right now"*.

When commenting upon the potential links between her involvement with blogging and her mental health, one 23-year-old participant within the Active Younger blogger group openly described the levels of stress that she felt as a result of blogging. She specifically drew a causal relationship between her hobby and her developing anorexia, almost suggesting that losing weight was a prerequisite for the success of fashion-blog posts: *"Yes I struggle with mental health and I have suffered from anorexia so there is a lot of pressure for me, you do look better in clothes if you are skinny, that's why models are so skinny, and I feel pressure a lot of the time to be a certain size for clothes and I won't post a photo on my blog if I feel I don't look good"*. This participant revealed that she was currently studying a fashion-related course at university and she conceded that her insecurities about her self-image may have originated from the impact of industry advertising that permeate fashion magazines. However, she specifically identified her interest in fashion blogging and her own approach to her blogging practice, as

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highly influential factors in this respect. She also alluded to what she saw as the highly competitive visual environment of contemporary blogging, feeling: *"a lot of pressure to look a certain way, based on how many other fashion bloggers look online"*.

Another Active Younger blogger recognised that the pressures of being involved in fashion blogging were having an impact on some of her peers with potentially detrimental implications for them. In her comment, she expressed the hope that blogging could create concerned communities for action to help deal with this problem: *"Through my blog, I want to raise awareness about mental health and be a resource for people looking for help when it comes to mental illness. I'm aware of the impact that social media can have on people and want to address and discuss these topics through my blog. I'd love to build a small community around that purpose, remove any stigma around the topic and let my readers know they're not alone"*.

In contrast, one respondent made very positive comments about the impact of her blogging experience upon her mental health. This 51-year-old participant from the Active Older blogger group said that she found blogging to be a highly therapeutic activity. This older individual revealed that she suffered from multiple sclerosis and particularly enjoyed the welcome distraction that fashion blogging could offer her: *"I am not always well, and so blogging is a great outlet for me. I find it incredibly therapeutic, and it gives me a distraction from my normal, everyday life. I get a lot of comfort from documenting my life online and it continues to be a wonderful release for me"*. This was the only comment offered by the members of the 307 strong group that specifically made a positive link between the practice of blogging and medical health. This is surprising given the findings of Boniel-Nissam and Barak (2013), Peek *et al* (2015), Callahan *et al* (2018), Limatius (2019) and Hibsch and Mason (2020), who all emphasise the health benefits of blogging in terms of personal and emotional wellbeing.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.5.5 Inactive Bloggers

Inactive bloggers were asked an initial general question about why they ceased their blogging activity. They were specifically asked: I *notice that you have now stopped blogging. Can you please explain your main reasons behind this decision?* Their responses were then categorised into two groups: intrinsic pressures and extraneous factors. Intrinsic pressures fundamentally related to difficulties encountered in the activity of blogging. Extraneous factors might also relate to developments in their offline life, such as moving from part-time to full-time employment. It is significant to note that a considerable majority of Inactive bloggers [66%] made reference to pressures that were intrinsic to the activity. However, many of these comments also referred to the interaction between difficulties they encountered in the practice of blogging [intrinsic pressure] and the external pressures on their time and energy [extraneous factors].

Figure 4.21: Reasons to stop blogging for Inactive bloggers:

Reasons to Stop Blogging:
Inactive Bloggers

- Intrinsic Pressures - 66%
- Extraneous Factors - 34%
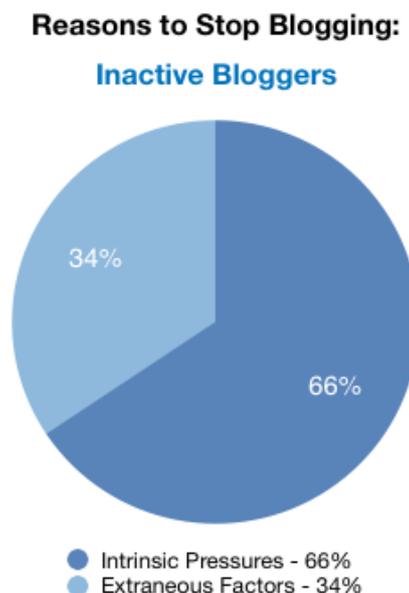
Almost a third of Inactive bloggers [34%] indicated that they had primarily stopped blogging as a result of what were classified as extraneous factors. These included: securing full-time employment and therefore having insufficient time to dedicate to their blog; changes in family demands; and losing their initial interest

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and passion for the activity of fashion blogging. Moving on to other online pastimes and social channels, such as Instagram and Twitter, was also a significant reason why many bloggers became inactive. One 28-year-old spoke for others in the group who had given up due to other demands on their time: *"It was such a time-consuming hobby and once I started my full-time job, I just didn't have any time to dedicate to it, and when I did have spare time, I wanted to do other things, I suppose I just grew out of it too, my interests changed"*. Other Inactive bloggers, such as this 27-year-old, based their decision to abandon their hobby for less demanding online activities: *"When you blog, you have to write a decent amount of content and have multiple pictures. The minute Instagram arrived, I switched off from the blog, it was easier to post a small caption and one picture on Instagram, and I got far more engagement through it too"*. These reasons for discontinuing with blog activities were typical throughout the group and have also been noted by many studies including Shiau and Luo, (2010), Shiau, Huang and Shih (2011) and Carah and Shaul (2016).

The remaining two-thirds of study participants within the Inactive blogger group [66%] revealed that they primarily stopped blogging due to intrinsic pressures specifically generated by taking part in the activity. These respondents often expressed thoughts similar to those expressed by the Active Younger participants described above, e.g. blogging activity could become more arduous and stressful when sponsorship was involved and/or when there was increased pressure to meet company deadlines. This 26-year-old spoke for a number in the group: *"Blogging very quickly went from being my favourite hobby, to being something that felt like a chore, something that was stressful…"*. Other respondents spoke of the growing professionalism and competitiveness of the sector which had become increasingly off-putting, and this 28-year-old specifically identified this reason for her quitting: *"It became very corporate and professional very quickly and that's when I knew it was time for me to stop".* A 25-year-old also referred to what she thought was the corporatization of what had been an amateur hobby: *"Blogging should not be called blogging anymore. It should be called online networking. Blogging is just a corporate activity now, it's become like business networking and full of folk trying to get noticed by brands"*. Several participants, like this 28-year-

old, pinpointed the pressure to continually make changes to their blog posts and adapt their standards of blogging quality, both again linked to increased professionalism: *"My blog started off as an online diary and I was happy posting anything, regardless of how it looked. And then, all of a sudden, the quality of blogging shifted, and it seemed overnight, everyone upped their game, and I no longer felt comfortable posting my mini diary-like posts. I felt that every post I published had to be polished and curated, it couldn't just be my random little thoughts anymore"*. For this respondent, the original sense of individual pleasure that she gained from blogging had been replaced by a feeling that she had to conform to standards set by others. Another Inactive blogger reflected in detail on how her hobby had become more business-like and therefore more time-consuming and stressful. Her comment conveyed her feeling that blogging had become a relentless slog: *"Nobody wants their hobby to become a stressful chore and that's how it began to feel. I suppose it's similar as if your hobby was making crafts, and you start selling your crafts online. It's initially awesome but then there is pressure to make stuff on time, all the time. I felt like this towards blogging, I felt pressure to remain relevant all the time, to be posting every single day, not just on my blog but also on my Instagram account, I felt I couldn't take a day off. That is the problem with blogging now, you have to be online 24/7"*. This increased pressure and tension as a result of changes in the blogosphere felt by bloggers when their hobby becomes over-demanding is also noted by Ots and Abidin (2017) and Safitri (2017).

4.5.6 Impact of increased pressure on blogging community

When investigating this in more depth across the three groups, many Active Younger bloggers and Inactive bloggers still generally agreed that the fashion element of the blogosphere remained home to a positive, supportive community overall. However, a small majority of respondents within these two groups combined [54%] pointed to a growing sense of competitiveness within the blogging community. Their comments often referred to the increased number of active bloggers overall and the pressures of professionalisation, culminating in a

sense that the community has become less amicable, less community-based and less supportive.

What had once often been regarded as akin to a sisterhood (Pihl, 2014; Lungeanu and Parisi, 2017), was now, in the words of one respondent, increasingly 'bitchy': *"Blogging went from feeling like a sisterhood and a real community I could reach out and speak to, and it suddenly turned bitchy, and the activity generated drama".* Numerous respondents identified the same change in the tone and atmosphere on the blogosphere from community to competition: *"It's turned into a competitive, bitchy environment where girls are pitted against each other. Instead of girls lifting each other up, I feel they are too quick to criticise each other online and fight for the attention".* In particular, more than two-thirds of the Inactive bloggers group [69%] stated that they believed that the community aspect of blogging had dissipated: *"The community feel is gone, it's all just so corporate and commercial and saturated".* This suggests that the change in tone and atmosphere was one of the key reasons why they had discontinued the activity. Coupled with increased pressures from commercial brand involvement, blogging for many of these participants had ceased to be a fun, enjoyable hobby, a feeling that has also been documented by Hajli *et al* (2017) and Chen and Behm-Morawitz (2018).

Following on from this, many participants, particularly those within the Inactive blogger group, also described how blogging had changed for them, often using nostalgic terms that expressed a sense of loss, both for the fun of the activity and the disappearance of community: *"There was an allure to blogging that just isn't there anymore".* Similar to the findings of Pedroni, Sadaba and San Miguel (2017) and Neumann (2018), respondents frequently expressed a longing for what they perceived as *"the good old days"* of the initial blogging community when it had been smaller, less commercialised and had operated as a friendly, self-contained 'social club'. A 28-year-old Inactive blogger, who stopped blogging in 2016, expressed her lament for the evaporation of the community spirit: *"It's really sad because back in the day, it was a lot nicer. Big bloggers would actually comment on smaller bloggers' content, and I felt there was so much support and*

encouragement, and a real community. Now, that would never happen. You'd be lucky if one of the big bloggers even likes your picture, let alone leaves a comment". The lack of the interaction with others via comments on posts, fundamental in the early days of blogging, was something that clearly dispirited bloggers who increasingly felt they were being overlooked, a view expressed by this 27-year-old Inactive blogger: *"I miss SO MUCH about blogging. I miss the community. I miss actually writing. But it got to the point where nobody was reading my posts anymore, and the interaction and conversations that I got through my posts were the most rewarding part. So, I miss that. I miss the vulnerability that blogging could offer, the raw, unfiltered words that people would share"*. This participant's decision to cease blogging was clearly fuelled by a sense of deep loss. She lamented the decline in community camaraderie that she had enjoyed and was saddened that language, both reading and writing, no longer held the important place it had in her early blogging experience. Above all, she expressed that loss in terms of the types of language that she felt had disappeared from the blogosphere, the honest unbiased approaches to talking about products that was at the heart of blogging's authentic voice.

This sense that the community spirit within blogging had been diluted was shared by members of both the Active Younger and Inactive groups who were of similar age. However, almost two-thirds [59%] of Active Older bloggers expressed a distinctly different opinion, continuing to express their pleasure in, and support for, the community aspects of blogging. A typical comment was made by this 64-year-old blogger: *"I love the community aspect of blogging and getting to know others"*. These participants mentioned how they continued to enjoy receiving comments from readers, meeting new people through their blog, speaking to others about their hobby and sharing wider personal interests such as beauty products and literature. A number of these Active Older participants also mentioned the helpful emotional support that they continued to receive from other bloggers within the community. For these respondents, active blogging remained an important part of their overall involvement in social media, which now often included other platforms such as online forums and WhatsApp groups, as this 56-year-old blogger affirmed: *"I am part of a WhatsApp group of over-50s bloggers*

and I find it very supportive, we help each other out a lot and ask each other a lot of questions about how certain things work in the blogging world. We share our blog posts with one another and let each other know when we've got a new post out and things like that. It's been a very supportive network". This last comment indicates that, while blogging still provides a community platform for many participants, some of the social benefits that were once largely provided by blogging alone can be accessed through a range of online channels, a finding noted by Lockie (2019).

4.5.7 Theme three discussion: pressure

A significant majority of respondents [79%] had experienced some form of mixed reaction and/or pressure as a result of accepting financial or other material rewards from sponsorship. Although many respondents expressed initial excitement when offered sponsorship opportunities (Hall, 2017: Mutum *et al*, 2018), some felt uncomfortable with the way in which partnership with certain brands might potentially impact upon their blogging activity. Other participants commented on the often self-induced pressures that they felt when trying to meet higher professional standards of content presentation (Pinjamaa and Cheshire, 2016; Schauster and Neill, 2017). Some respondents revealed that they had experienced increased levels of stress as a result of trying to meet tight company posting deadlines. These findings relate to a number of studies, including Petersen (2014), Pedroni (2015), Ots and Abidin (2017), who all agree that bloggers can face an increased sense of pressure when interacting with commercial sponsors. The above studies discuss the negative implications of featuring blog sponsorship, the strict actions companies may take in order to control their brand message online, and the effect this can then have on an individual blogger and their sponsorship experience. The findings of this specific research study confirm that these outcomes are also prevalent in the fashion element of the blogosphere.

A number of participants within this current study felt a self-induced need for enhanced blog professionalism, with many conscious of the fact that they might not have felt this way had it not been for sponsorship. This correlates with the work of Riboni (2017) and Safitri (2017), who note that fashion bloggers can place increased amounts of pressure upon themselves to meet perceived sector standards, particularly once they become commercially involved with a company. Ots and Abidin (2017) and Rocamora (2018) both agree that bloggers can feel the need to enhance their own creative output, develop their technical skills and expand their understanding of the sector, in order to be perceived in a more professional light by both readers, other bloggers and by companies.

Many participants in the study confirmed this, as some revealed they had commissioned professional photographers to capture blog outfits, whilst others

discussed how they had undertaken external courses in areas such as web design, photography and search-engine optimisation, in order to gain more useful knowledge and expertise that would help professionalise and monetise their blogging activity. Pedroni (2015) found that many bloggers enjoy attending classes that help them to enhance their skills in blogging and can simultaneously experience a wider sense of fulfilment from knowing that they are accruing transferable skills because of their interest in the activity. Riboni (2017) also notes that bloggers who are seen to have greater expertise, particularly in technical areas of blogging, can be perceived as more trustworthy by their audience: readers often recognise and appreciate this commitment to learning as a factor that confers positive attributes to the blogger.

This importance that internet users of many kinds place upon developing their digital skills in order to present their 'best virtual face' has long been identified by commentators as helping fuel an ever-increasing professionalism across the social media (Pearson, 2010; Ranzini and Hoek, 2017). Many participants in this study reflected upon the professional development of the fashion blogosphere and argued that meeting its heightened level of professionalism has in fact become an essential requirement to blog. This growing pressure to become more professional correlates with the findings of Pedroni, Sadaba and San Miguel (2017): that bloggers can feel self-induced pressures to adopt more professional practices in order to remain competitive in a saturated blogging sector.

Nevertheless, a third of participants [33%] stated that they themselves had not felt that sponsorship imposed unacceptable obligations on their blogging practice, and many stated that they still felt wholly in control of their blog activity. Respondents who expressed these feelings were mainly Older Active bloggers, who tended to take a very optimistic view of their involvement with companies, and, in most cases, registered a high degree of enthusiasm, satisfaction and pleasure from collaborating with brands.

One key finding that emerged was the view commonly held by respondents that many companies exhibited a lack of understanding when it came to working with fashion bloggers, particularly with regard to the ways in which potential

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collaborations should be best organised and operated. In their comments, many respondents volunteered advice and recommendations that they felt might be helpful in alleviating pressure in future collaborations. Kristensen and Christensen (2017) and Pedroni, Sadaba and San Miguel (2017) also recognised a need for companies to adopt a more co-operative approach when working with bloggers. Participants offered three main areas of feedback for brands to consider in this respect: the importance of blog and brand match; respecting the independence of bloggers' own choices; and the mutual value gained from building long-lasting relationships. This advice shows the awareness of many research participants of the ways in which sponsorship collaborations could potentially work better in the future, and how brands should approach fashion bloggers. This relates to the findings of Pihl and Sandström (2011), Lankinen (2014) and Esposito *et al* (2017), who stress the importance of blog and brand match across the general blogosphere when seeking to create a relevant and effective blog advert. Pihl (2013b) and Laurell (2014) also found that respecting bloggers' own choices, e.g. allowing the blogger to select items to review or feature, was also an effective strategy. Respecting blogger independence in this way made it more likely that the blogger will like the product, will share a positive review of it and will probably continue to showcase it on their blog once the collaboration is over.

Other studies, such as Pedroni (2015), Riboni (2017) and Rocamora (2018), examined the impact upon readers when their favoured bloggers developed long-term collaborations with brands. Developments of this kind have the potential to encourage reader confidence in a blogger who was able to demonstrate the ability to maintain a long-term relationship with respected companies. The current study seems to confirm these observations. Participants in all three groups expressed their preference for working as a 'brand ambassador' for one particular fashion company over a period of months, rather than for numerous companies in a sporadic one-off manner. These participants felt that sustained evidence that they were trusted by a brand was a positive factor that helped to establish the credibility and authenticity of their fashion opinions in the minds of their readers.

Nevertheless, a number of participants accepted that involvement in longer-term sponsorships meant that they were entering into a professional, business

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

relationship, which could stimulate an increased sense of duty to promote items and companies as best they could but also impact on their loyalty to readers. This finding relates in part to the work of Koivisto (2019) and Hanusch, Banjac and Maares (2019), who found that bloggers can face increased self-induced pressure to adopt an advertorial tone of voice when creating content on behalf of a brand and will aim to align themselves very closely with a particular brand in order to foster long-term and repeat collaborations. Similarly, Hracs, Jakob and Hauge (2013) argue that, if a blogger does not comply with a company's wishes, they may not be able to secure future collaborations and/or foster long-term relations with said company. Koivisto (2019) and Gunawan and Iskandar (2020) also emphasise that, the more a company invests in a blogger, the greater the pressure that blogger can feel to reciprocate in a way that is useful to the company. This pressure was felt by a significant number of the research participants, who appreciated the danger of becoming distanced from their original and personally distinct voice.

When investigating the pressures felt by bloggers, many participants reported feeling a greater sense of pressure generated by fellow bloggers in comparison to that which came from working with brands. This finding contrasts markedly with studies drawn from the earlier age of the blogosphere. These included Schiano *et al* (2004), Zhu and Tan (2007) and Ekdale *et al* (2010), who all emphasised the importance of the community aspect of the activity for its participants. They also recorded how interaction between like-minded individuals who shared common personal and social interests was a major factor in fuelling the motivation to start and continue blogging. Academic literature examining fashion blogging in this early period, an activity predominantly pursued by female users, frequently described the sense of a relatively small, social, amicable community with shared values and interests typified by the use of the term 'sisterhood'. These early studies make little reference to inter-blogger pressure.

By contrast, however, a considerable number of participants in the current study [58%] revealed they have experienced considerable online pressure from other bloggers. This confirms Titton (2015:215), who observed that fashion bloggers in particular were increasingly experiencing pressure as a result of sharing outfit

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

posts with their peers and readers. They felt the need to consistently showcase their creativity, taste and personal stylist expertise and demonstrate these to others within the community through their creation and/or selection of frequently changing and 'carefully composed' outfits. Pedroni (2015:187) and Safitri (2017) found that bloggers were experiencing increased pressure as they were now often having to learn how to present themselves as 'fashionable personae'. For example, to an ever-greater degree they were now having to learn how to pose professionally in different ways in their images in order to maintain their popularity and credibility with readers and their reputation amongst fellow bloggers. This pressure to present a 'carefully curated' social impression, to 'stage the glam life', clearly affects producers of online content in different social media, not just in blogging but the related world of Instagram (Duffy and Hund, 2015:4; Archer 2019).

To some extent, this essentially negative view of the impact of the increasing need to emulate and compete with fashion-blogging peers is not much discussed in other earlier studies. Kottke (2013) and Cole (2015) emphasised instead that the blogosphere had always offered bloggers opportunities to demonstrate their uniqueness and creativity: this is one of the factors that made it such a popular medium in the first place. For example, from a relatively early stage in the development of blogging, popular fashion blogs showcased individual street style for women of all ages, celebrated diverse fashion choices and body shapes, and offered rebellion from the tyranny of mass magazines which had long dictated what customers should wear and how they should ideally look. More recent studies, such as Koivista (2019), argue that many long-term bloggers continue to want to maintain aspects of individuality, yet simultaneously still feel a strong need to fit in with their online peers and continue to shape their blogging identity according to this need. This pressure to meet appearance-related norms and targets to project the impression of the 'virtual good life', one rich in self-esteem, also features in studies beyond blogging alone but across social media as a whole (Åberg, Koivula and Kukkonen, 2020:8).

A number of studies (Lunde, 2013: Perloff, 2014: Lewwallen and Behn-Morawitz, 2016) have suggested that following and reading blogs can impact upon the

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

mental health of blog readers: specifically, adolescent blog consumers may feel pressured to emulate a preferred blogger, particularly in terms of appearance and body image. However, some studies suggest that the bloggers themselves can also experience this form of pressure, in particular the 'desire for thinness' described by Åberg, Koivula and Kukkonen (2020:2). For example, Eckert (2018) argues that fashion bloggers can experience considerable pressure when they are planning how best to portray themselves online, particularly in terms of facial expressions and body angles, in order to compete with other bloggers. Chittenden (2010) and Heffner (2012) also found that bloggers can often feel intense pressure to continually post new items and products, as the same outfits are rarely posted again. Therefore, bloggers can feel under constant pressure to produce and post new content, and to search for novelty in their output. These findings are confirmed by the current study. Many of its participants revealed how this perceived pressure from other bloggers online has in fact had an impact on their mental health, particularly in regard to body image and the need to continually compare themselves to others. One participant even felt that the ever-increasing pressure to present herself effectively online had contributed to the development of anorexia.

Another participant expressed her sense of unease when she spoke of the need to 'put on a mask' online in order to portray and sustain a certain aesthetic identity on her blog that was significantly different from her real-life appearance, values and feelings. This conscious decision of some bloggers to shield parts of their 'real' personality and their natural feelings relates to the seminal work of Goffman (1956), who recorded the ways in which individuals attempt to control or guide the impression that they make upon others by changing or fixing their setting, appearance or manner. Underlying many of these concerns expressed by participants is their discomfort at participating in activities, such as posing, that are essentially distanced from their own authentic identity.

The suggestion that involvement in blogging has a perceptible negative impact upon some participants' mental health is at odds with the observations of numerous studies, such as Boniel-Nissam and Barak (2013) Peek *et al* (2015), Callahan *et al* (2018) and Limatius (2019). These tended to emphasise instead

the positive advantages that blogging can offer individuals, particularly in regard to the therapeutic help it can offer to those under mental and social pressure. In particular, Limatius (2019:1) argues that fashion blogging has opened up a world of greater acceptance and easier communication for individuals who may have felt denigrated and/or excluded by the 'traditional' fashion industry. In this view, blogging has been beneficial, allowing individuals, such as plus-size fashion bloggers, to identify with and be a part of social movements such as 'fat acceptance activism' and 'body positive activism' which can in turn improve the mental health and social well-being of such individuals. However, only one participant within the current study raised issues that referred to the beneficial therapeutic consequences of blogging: she took the opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which blogging had been helpful when dealing with aspects of her mental health at a time of chronic illness.

Experiencing pressure of some kind was also revealed to be one of the common reasons why some of the Inactive bloggers stopped their blogging activity. Only 34% of participants within the Inactive bloggers group stopped blogging due to extraneous factors such as assuming full-time employment and/or indulging in other hobbies and social channels such as Instagram and YouTube. However, the remaining 66% of participants within the Inactive bloggers group admitted that they had stopped blogging due to intrinsic factors, particularly because of the increasing pressures associated with the activity as a result of the increased role of sponsorship. This may reflect the fact that all of the Inactive bloggers were relatively young: all were in their 20s and arguably more susceptible and vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of pressure. These participants revealed a number of specific reasons why they had lost interest in the activity. These included pressure from fashion companies, which was making blogging seem more onerous in nature by imposing tighter demands on content deadlines etc; the sense of saturation as the fashion blogosphere continued to expand; and the consequent growing professionalism and overall competitiveness of the sector. All had contributed to greater dissatisfaction with the activity. Wang *et al* (2020) also noted that the effort required to maintain a positive public virtual image often induced unacceptable levels of stress, dissatisfaction and loneliness which

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

discouraged both producers and readers of social media and led to their abandoning these activities.

As noted earlier, many respondents in the current study, particularly within the Younger and Inactive blogger groups, expressed the view that their sense of a blogger community had faded due to increased perceived pressure and commercialisation of the sector. This has been noted by Gannon and Prothero (2016), Neumann (2018) and Whitmer (2020), who found that many bloggers already felt nostalgic for their earlier activity within the original 'hobby period' blogosphere when there were fewer commercial undertones. However, this essentially negative portrayal of change within the blogosphere is refuted by some researchers such as Lungeanu and Parisi (2017:45), who argue that the community aspect and the sense of belonging to a 'sisterhood of blogging' still inspires and motivates many bloggers today. In addition, in the current study, participants amongst the Active Older blogger group continued to comment upon the social benefits and rewards that they received from the activity, particularly the extent of personal and emotional support that they received from other community members. This correlates with Lockie (2019) who also argued that many bloggers, even those that are new to the activity, can still experience high levels of satisfaction thanks to the social interaction, shared experiences and emotional support that continue to be an important of aspect of the platform.

Therefore, in response to Research Question Three [are there any pressures felt by bloggers as a result of accepting financial and other material rewards of sponsorship?], the responses from all three groups in this study confirm that bloggers can face a range of pressures, both from brand requirements and personal, self-induced stresses and tensions. These tensions were identified to be stronger amongst the Active Younger blogger and Inactive blogger groups but were discussed by some older participants as well. Indications of concern about mental health were also more frequent among Active Younger bloggers. Another main difference between the three groups relates to the perception that the community spirit in the blogosphere was fading. The majority of Active Younger and Inactive bloggers felt that the increased professionalism and competitiveness of the sector has had a detrimental impact upon their sense of community.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Nevertheless, over half of participants in the Active Older grouping continued to describe the blogosphere as a supportive, positive network overall.

4.6 Theme Four: Blog 'code of conduct'

Another theme which emerged from the study was that of a blogger code of conduct, with almost all participants demonstrating some level of awareness of the regulatory framework and ethical standards that bloggers are expected to appreciate and respect. Of the three groups, Active Younger bloggers were the most well-informed about this aspect of their blogging practice, with 90% of the respondents in this group having some degree of awareness and knowledge of the Advertising Standards Agency, the UK's leading independent advertising regulator. The response from Active Older bloggers suggested that they were considerably less informed about this aspect of the blogosphere, with only 33% mentioning an awareness of the ASA and its potential relevance for their practice. Curiously, Inactive bloggers registered a higher number of comments [53%] in this regard, despite having distanced themselves from the activity. Their relative awareness of this issue may reflect the fact that all participants in this group were within the 20-29 age range and may have come across more information about these issues as everyday users of social media. Nevertheless, every individual participant in the study was aware that the practice of blogging involved certain responsibilities laid down by official bodies.

4.6.1 Disclosure of Sponsorship

Figure 4.22 Disclosure of sponsorship – all 307 respondents:

Do you always disclose sponsorship?
All Participants - 307

- Yes - 71%
- No - 29%

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
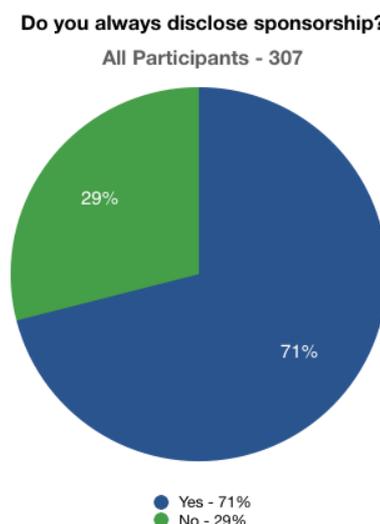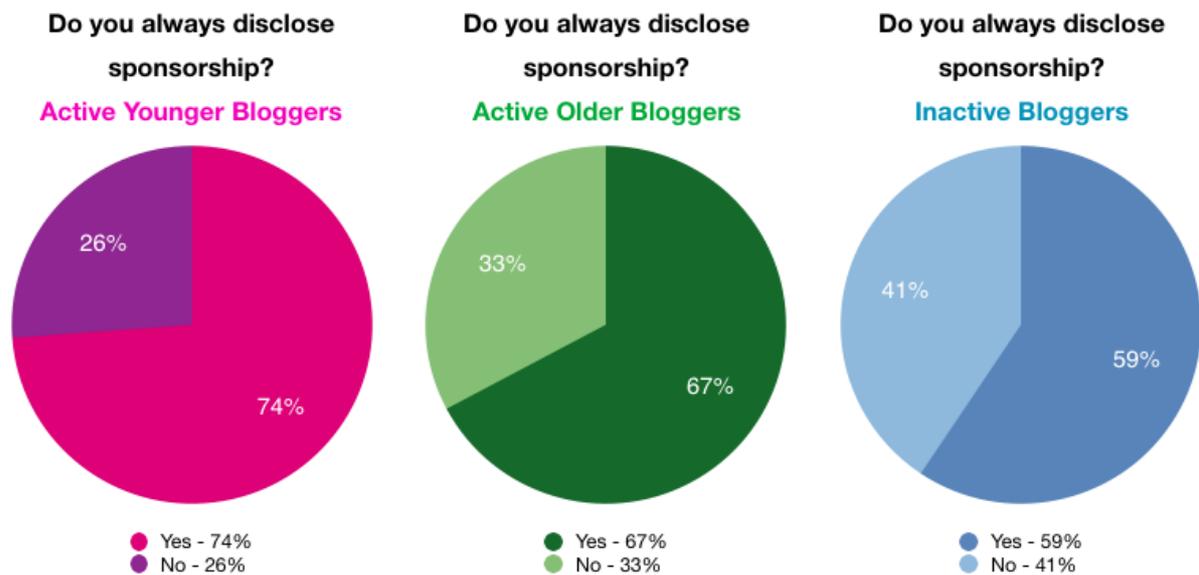
Figure 4.23: Disclosure of sponsorship: results for each group:

All participants were asked to indicate whether or not they disclosed to their readership when a particular blog post had been sponsored. Of the 307 respondents, 71% stated that they had always indicated to their readers when a featured item had been gifted or when there was some other form of commercial involvement. Participants within this 71% tended to be very conscious of the negative impact upon their readers' perception of trust and credibility if they were found to have been untruthful about sponsorship material: *"There is no chance that I would post something that has been sent to me without me letting the audience know it has been gifted or sponsored. Bloggers have a responsibility not to mislead their audience and to be very clear about what Advert, Gifted and Sponsored actually means"*. Many in this group emphasised the importance of maintaining their integrity in the eyes of their readers. Transparency was important, and signalling to their readers that they were confirming to ASA guidelines was also very useful in this respect: *"Yes, I always disclose brand partnerships. I am aware of the ASA guidelines and I'm careful to put #AD at the start of my blog posts. It's incredibly important to be transparent with your audience, and I don't want to get into trouble"*.

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However, a significant number of all participants [29%] admitted that they had not always disclosed commercial involvement and collaborations, particularly when they had first been approached by a brand to promote a product, a behaviour which has also been observed in the general blogosphere by Doyle *et al* (2012) and Huang (2015). This was particularly the case with those within the Inactive blogger group, where a significant number of respondents [41%] revealed that they had not always disclosed evidence of commercial collaboration.

Many respondents from all three groups described their behaviour in this respect in terms of a gradual learning curve that had had implications for their changing practice. As noted above, the majority of all respondents began blogging during the period 2013-2014, at a point in time when guidelines around product/ brand disclosure were not especially clear or particularly well-advertised. A number of comments [13%] indicated that, in the earlier stages of their blogging activity, some participants had not felt particularly well informed about the way in which advertising legislation potentially affected their role as a fashion blogger. Several participants referred back to their initial concerns and worries about their first use of sponsored material, but they primarily expressed this in terms of how it affected their relationship with readers: *"I will be honest and let you know that I did not always disclose partnerships in the beginning, I do honestly think I was a little naïve and didn't really know what I was doing, I was worried my readers would be annoyed or put off that it was an advert"*. Some respondents were therefore very aware that their decision to include sponsored material could have a negative impact on the way their output was viewed by some readers. They were conscious and concerned that, in some sense, commercialising their practice would be viewed in a negative way: *"I started blogging in 2010 and I didn't always disclose it because I think back then, it was seen as a bad thing to be working with a brand and you didn't want to let people know that you were being paid"*. Interestingly, this feeling of contravening some earlier moral aspects of blogging often seems to have been self-generated from within the participants themselves rather than being a response to reader comment or complaint. However, as previously discussed in Theme Three, a number [17%] of Active Younger bloggers revealed that they had been specifically advised and/or pressurised by companies not to

reveal the commercial nature of their relationship. This generally hesitant feeling towards revealing commercial involvement in case it was perceived in negative terms by readers is a feature of studies by Marwick (2015), Evans *et al* (2017) and Lou and Yuan (2019).

It was common for these respondents to defend their earlier actions in terms of naivety and/or ignorance of official codes of conduct relating to online advertising. Most, however, claimed that they now took care to follow these official codes in addition to formulating their own personal guidelines when it came to collaborating with brands. Furthermore, a number of respondents claimed that they now set their own monetary limitations when accepting sponsored goods. This 53-year-old Active Older blogger specifically stressed the importance to her of setting her own personal rules and adhering to them. In her case, her self-regulation was based upon the retail value of the gifted products that she was asked to feature in her output: *"The hard and fast rule that I stick to is that, if I can't normally afford it, then I won't accept it. If it was a coat worth £600, however lovely it is, I would say no. I would not normally buy clothes at that price, I only buy affordable high street"*. Other participants often set limits to the number of sponsored items that they included in their blog per month, spreading these out and ensuring that they maintained a balance of sponsored and non-sponsored content in their output: *"I only accept three paid partnerships per month, and I split these over blog posts and social media posts"* and *"Yeah, I try to avoid posting a lot of branded content at once and will spread any sponsored posts I have over the month, instead of posting them all at once. I think it's good to have a mix of sponsored and non-sponsored posts"*. This particular strategy had also been adopted by members of the Active Older group: *"I only feature one sponsored collaboration on my blog per month, I don't want to bombard my readers with sponsored content. Instagram is a bit different as I post more regularly on there, I feature 3-4 sponsored posts a month at my busiest time"*.
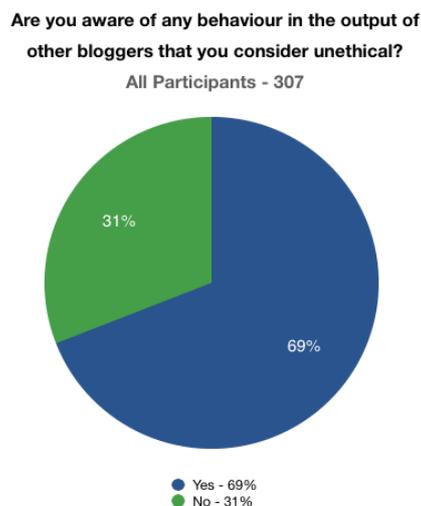
These participants clearly felt that they were acting in an essentially moral way: they seemed proud of their personal rules and felt they were acting honestly. They also felt that they were signalling to their readers that, although they were

accepting sponsored products for inclusion in their blog, they were not acting in an overly mercenary way and were attempting to moderate this aspect of their output. However, it might be argued that to some extent they were disguising their behaviour by seeking to downplay the extent of their involvement in commercial activity by posting different elements of their sponsorship activity on different kinds of online channels.

Imposing self-created limitations to the amount of sponsored material in their blog, as the two respondents above claimed to have done, may have been promoted in part by greater awareness of ASA guidelines. They may also have been influenced by the extensive media publicity given to several misdemeanours by bloggers in the UK and overseas in recent years. Alternatively, it may simply have been the result of realising that other similar bloggers were actively establishing rules about disclosure and so following their practice. It may be the case that self-limiting bloggers were acting from cynical motives, such as not wishing to 'over-milk' a generous sponsor or alienate readers, but the results from all three groups contained no explicit evidence of this. This self-regulating approach to brand sponsorship on general blogs is also discussed by a number of studies, including Hunter (2015), Khuong (2016), Stanton, Ellickson-Larew and Watson (2016) and Vierman and Hudders (2020).

4.6.2 Unethical Behaviour of Others

Figure 4.24: Unethical behaviour of others

Are you aware of any behaviour in the output of other bloggers that you consider unethical?

All Participants - 307

31%

69%

● Yes - 69%
● No - 31%

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

A significant majority of participants in each group [69%] revealed that they were aware of and had noticed the 'unethical' behaviour of other bloggers. The main example of what they considered to be unethical behaviour by fellow bloggers was the non-disclosure of commercial involvements. Many respondents referred to the practice of purchasing fake followers in order to make their follower count appear larger and thus attract further sponsorship opportunities from brands. One 57-year-old Active Older blogger who was aware of this practice, offered her opinion on why many bloggers resorted to it: *"Yeah, I know of people buying fake followers to make their following seem much greater than it actually is, I think so that they can secure more sponsorship"*. Some respondents referred to it in heavily judgemental tones, such as this 28-year-old Inactive blogger: *"Oh yeah, there's heaps of bloggers out there that have bought fake followers, which is just something that I can't tolerate, it's terrible behaviour and they shouldn't be doing it"*. Other participants simply accepted that it was an inevitable and understandable development in a more commercialised blog environment. This 24-year-old Active Younger blogger pointed to the lack of any effective regulatory supervision of this practice in fashion blogging: *"I know people that have bought fake followers. It's sad that they feel they need to do that to grow their blog and stuff... it's a difficult one though 'cause it's definitely become the norm online to do stuff like that and I can totally understand why people do, it's so easy to get away with it, like who is going to question you? It's why so many have done it because nobody is actually calling them out, but we still all know they do it"*. Significantly, none of the 307 respondents in this study admitted to having bought fake followers themselves. This could simply indicate that all study members were relatively small-scale practitioners and had genuinely never felt the need or desire to fake the size of their readership. However, it may possibly reflect the moral stigma that many bloggers attach to this practice, which is felt so deeply that none felt able to admit indulging in it.

Another example of unethical behaviour that was identified by participants was the practice of exaggerating their experience and success as a blogger. One 26-year-old referred to this practice which she clearly felt was dishonest: *"I've seen lots of bloggers being unethical by pretending to have received sponsorship just*

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

to create the illusion that they were already successful". Another participant, a 25-year-old Active Younger blogger, expressed her belief that some 'dishonest' bloggers were regularly labelling posts as 'sponsored' even when they were not. She believed that this was done in order to enhance the reputation of the blogger and to therefore encourage her overall collaborations with brands in the future: *"I know of people that want to create an illusion online, they want to give brands the impression that they are someone with much greater influence than they actually have. I know people pretend to have received paid opportunities so that they will get more brands to work with them. I know people that use the #AD and #Gifted for appearances' sake"*.

Other respondents suspected that many fashion bloggers were learning to use Photoshop in order to distort the images that they included on their blogs in the same way as professional photographers who work in the commercial magazine sector: *"they're photoshopping their pictures nowadays, it's not real anymore"*. A number of participants felt that these deceptive practices and perceived lack of authenticity was having a detrimental impact upon the relationship between fashion bloggers and their blog readers. Typical was the comment made by one 55-year-old Active Older blogger who specifically expressed her sorrow at the way in which these practices damaged the sense of trust between blog creator and consumer: *"It's such a shame they would do that to their readers and followers though"*. Similar concerns have been identified by Cheng and Fang (2015), Schauster and Neill (2017) and Eisend *et al* (2020).

A small number of comments made by members of the Active Younger blogger group [8%] pointed to their concerns about the way in which the newer practices highlighted above were impacting upon what they saw as the 'traditional' blogger principles. A 27-year-old Active Younger blogger specifically pointed the finger at newer entrants who were often younger, and in her view, less interested in maintaining the pre-existing values of fashion blogging: *"there are honestly so many newer, much younger bloggers out there being really unethical"*. She criticised these newer bloggers for disregarding what she felt were the rules underpinning the activity which maintained blogger honesty, authenticity and the

original sense of blogger community: *"You can't just make it up as you go along! You have to stick to the rules because the rules make it a level playing field for everyone. It is not fair for the ones who are honest and truthful"*.

A number of these participants also made a connection between the lack of professionalism shown by many of these 'less ethical' bloggers and the growing criticism of blogging in the public media: *"this is why so many bloggers get ridiculed or get given a bad reputation from the media"*. The 'less ethical' blogger was frequently seen as being in breach of a set of common values and ideals that held the blogosphere together, as this 28-year-old Active Younger blogger declared: *"I think some bloggers need to become more professional. Make sure you know exactly what is expected of you in return and just as importantly, make sure you deliver that. You are entering a contract and I think if you want to be taken seriously, you have to really respect that"*. Blogger concerns of this kind have been identified by Colliander and Erlandsson (2015), James (2017) and Meng and Ma (2019).

Respondents from the Active Younger blogger group were also particularly critical about the ways in which some fashion bloggers were now taking advantage of brands in order to receive more in the way of free products and monetary benefits. These participants claimed to be aware of individuals who would accept products from companies but then fail to post brand content in return. A 28-year-old Active Younger blogger with knowledge of this from her commercial employment verified this practice: *"From working in industry, I know some PR people who think a lot of bloggers just do it for all the free items and money. They just call them 'Blaggers' instead, as some will take the free products but will not actually create any content"*. Negative sentiments of this kind have also been noted and recorded by Stubb and Colliander (2019), Reale (2019) and Dekavalla (2020).

The effectiveness or otherwise of the ASA guidelines also attracted a number of comments, again particularly from Active Younger bloggers [14%], who were vocal on this topic. Several revealed that they had personally contacted the ASA to alert the authority to what they considered to be poor fashion-blogger

behaviour. However, they complained that contacting and informing the ASA had not brought about any significant action. One 26-year-old participant described her resort to the ASA and her consequent sense of disappointment at their ineffectual response: *"I have emailed the ASA on a few occasions to let them know when a blogger has not disclosed a sponsorship deal, and honestly nothing happens. The ASA replied and said they would look into it but I received no other update and the blogger continues to post in the same unethical way".* Other participants reported that they were not aware of any effective action by the ASA other than receiving a formal indication that their concern had been noted. The comments made by this 27-year-old typified the frustration felt by several participants at the lack of action by the ASA. She also described how she had amended her own blogging behaviour as a result: *"The ASA honestly doesn't seem to do anything apart from slap a few bloggers on the wrist. That is not enough for me, so I've decided I no longer follow people that don't follow the rules. It's really frustrating to know that people get away with it, it makes me really angry cause it's unfair on the rest of us that try really hard to be honest all the time".* A smaller percentage of these participants [5%] also offered more moderate reflective comments which suggested that they were aware that effectively regulating the blogosphere was a difficult task, particularly given the ever-increasing number of blogs online and the global 'nature' of the blogosphere: *"I am really not sure what type of action the ASA even takes if you don't follow the rules. I don't think anything would even happen because how can you keep track of thousands and thousands of bloggers?".* Research into the effectiveness of the ASA by James (2017), Ramirez (2018), Maden (2018) and Lemon, Childers and Hoy (2019) has also questioned the ability of the authority to adequately police the blog sector.

A number of participants drawn from all three groups [24%] also suggested that the existing ASA guidelines were not as clear or as well-known as they could or should be: *"There is a serious lack of education surrounding the ASA guidelines. It is not clear to everyone what they need to declare".* Others felt that, at times, the standard conventions of communication that bloggers are encouraged to use, could be confusing and seen as being cleverly disingenuous: *"I think most people understand that #Ad is an advert, but #Gifted can confuse people. I know people*

got confused thinking bloggers were calling themselves 'blessed' and 'talented', as opposed to understanding that the blogger was being gifted an item from a company". This confusion in relation to the blog disclosure guidelines has also been noted by Carlson (2015), Wright (2017) and Goanta and Ranchordás (2020).

4.6.3 Theme four discussion: blog 'code of conduct'

All participants within the study claimed to be aware that commercial involvement in blogging was governed in some way by ethical disclosure guidelines, although some had little specific knowledge of the ASA itself. A large majority of respondents agreed on the importance of open sponsorship disclosure and felt that bloggers should not attempt to obscure the source of products they have received from commercial partners. Many participants agreed that greater transparency in this respect would be welcomed by their readers and fellow bloggers. This finding relates to Williams and Hodges (2016), Farshidi (2018) and Wellman *et al* (2020), who found that bloggers can be very sensitive to the possible negative impact that failing to be transparent might have on their perceived trustworthiness and authenticity and might attract negative criticism from their readers.

Nevertheless, a significant number of participants across the three groups did reveal that they had not always disclosed commercial partnerships. In their defence, they often claimed that this was because they were new and inexperienced bloggers and/or because the initial guidelines surrounding product/ brand disclosure were not always clear. This relates to Mutum and Wang (2011), Doyle *et al* (2012) and Huang (2015), who found that bloggers could feel confusion when dealing with sponsorship, as they did not always have knowledge of the guidelines governing advertising practices that includes blogging and the required standards of behaviour. Frequently, a number of commercial companies who work with bloggers did not specifically require them to disclose the sponsored nature of the blog posts to their readers, thereby potentially breaching official guidelines (Wright, 2017; Goanta and Ranchordás, 2020).

Participants in this study also seemed to be concerned about how the initial inclusion of sponsored material in their blog would be perceived by their readership. These findings relate to a number of studies that examined blogger sponsorship disclosure. For example, Evans *et al* (2017) and Lou and Yuan (2019) found that bloggers often felt unsure as to how to proceed when faced with commercial disclosure decisions, and, as a result, did not always disclose for fear

of a backlash from their readership. However, this finding contrasts with Marwick (2015) who argued that sponsorship disclosure actually strengthened the trust that readers might have in a blogger who seemed to carry more weight because they were collaborating with a professional company.

A number of respondents went on to defend their reasoning for their original non-disclosure, and described how, over time, they had developed a set of self-made rules and/or personal guidelines that changed their behaviour when it came to collaborating with brands. This finding supports Hunter (2015), Khuong (2016), Rocamora (2018) and Vierman and Hudders (2020), who examined the many ways in which bloggers often self-regulate their commercial involvement. These four studies found that bloggers generally followed a set of rules that were similar to those expressed by the participants of the current study. Bloggers will tend to aim to: disclose brand involvement, set monetary limitations when accepting goods, feature only a limited set number of sponsored items per month, spread out the number of these sponsored posts across time, and ensure a balance of sponsored and non-sponsored content. This last point was observed by Stanton, Ellickson-Larew and Watson (2016), who noted that bloggers often try to ensure that sponsored posts do not take precedence over personal posts, in part to maintain the credibility of their own blog but also to enhance general transparency and authenticity across the blogging sector.

Many of the participants in the current study maintained that they continued to support ethical blogging ideals and that aspects of their own practice and output embodied these, yet they were very aware of a range of types of behaviour found in other blogs that they considered unethical. Instances of perceived unethical behaviour generally revolved around two issues: the lack of disclosure and the purchase of fake followers. This finding correlates with Abidin (2016), Josefsson, Rougié and Verboom (2017) and Sah, Malaviya and Thompson (2018), who also found similar questionable tactics that had been adopted for similar reasons, i.e. in order to attract online attention and gain a competitive advantage in their dealings with brands. Abidin and Ots (2017) also believed that, due to the increase in these practices, it was becoming more difficult to discern between organic commentary and paid sponsorship while Cheng and Fang (2015), Schauster and

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Neill (2017) and Eisend *et al* (2020) examined the negative impact this could have on blog readers if they felt that they were being deceived.

Some participants particularly pointed to the actions of bloggers who seemed to be new entrants to the sector and who were possibly unaware of the original values of the blogger community. They considered that these new entrants needed to learn to become more transparent and honest when posting sponsored brand material. This corresponds with Colliander and Erlandsson (2015) and Meng and Ma (2019), who discuss the negative attention and criticism that fashion bloggers have often received from rival media sources, such as fashion magazines, due to the lack of transparency in the blogging practice of some individuals. These study participants also believed that it was possible for fashion bloggers to take advantage of brands in order to maximise their benefits, such as free products and monetary rewards. This supports the work of James (2017) and Stubb and Colliander (2019), who found that it can be difficult for companies to measure and track the effectiveness of sponsored blog campaigns. It can also be difficult for the company to ensure that the blogger is properly disclosing his/her material relationship with an advertiser. Reale (2019) and Dekavalla (2020), examining this relationship in terms of practice and the framework of guidelines operating in the USA, recommended that both brands and bloggers should be required to enter into a contract that states the terms of the sponsorship, and outlines expectations for the performance and behaviour of both parties.

A small number of study participants agreed that the current ASA guidelines in the UK were not particularly clear, and the requirements that bloggers are expected to follow can lead to confusion. James (2017:76) noted that 'the rules are worryingly-vague and wide ranging', and Scafidi (2017:32) agreed that there was a 'vagueness in the guidelines as to whether a simple #ad alongside the blog post is enough'. The ASA sponsorship guidelines have been also criticised in a number of areas: restricting speech, double standards in the treatment of traditional and new advertising media, and the perceived unenforceability of the guidelines (Farshidi, 2018). Khuong (2016) and James (2017) both argue that the guidelines could be too lenient, as they rely on an honour system of voluntary disclosure and compliance from individual bloggers.

This need for change was also appreciated by some of the research participants, who questioned the effectiveness of the ASA. This group included several who had been frustrated and disappointed after no action seemed to have been taken by the ASA against fashion bloggers whom they considered to have breached existing guidelines. Maden's study (2018) also detected the desire amongst many experienced bloggers to have stronger enforceable guidelines, which would help maintain the standards and reputation of the sector.

Ramirez (2018) and Childers, Lemon and Hoy (2019) have argued that there needs to be a more regulated approach to blog sponsorship, with a more coherent system in place that would prevent unfair and anti-competitive actions, ensure that the consumer was made more aware of the commercial intent of some blog content, and place greater responsibility for reporting and auditing the commercial aspects of blogging upon the brands concerned. A number of study participants claimed that they had better understood the importance of openness in their fashion blogs once they had become involved with sponsorship, and that they generally appreciated the need for stronger, clearer guidelines. They appreciated that this was important for maintaining the overall credibility of fashion blogging. However, several respondents reflected on how difficult it would be to regulate effectively given the vast number of individuals that were involved in what is a global trans-national phenomenon.

Therefore, in response to Research Question Four [How has blogger perception of the rules and code of conduct affecting their practice changed as the blogosphere has become more commercial over time?], the responses gathered in this study confirm that most participants across the three groups tend to be generally aware of the developing regulations from bodies such as the ASA and the ways in which they have come to affect their practice. There was evidence that many fashion bloggers in all three groups had adapted their practice over time and had reflected upon the significance of the relevant codes of conduct in helping to change their outlook and values. Participants from the Active Younger blogger group were the most vocal and knowledgeable on this topic. This could be due to the fact that a greater number of participants in this group have professional and commercial aspirations for their blog, and/or that the bulk of members of this group

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

commenced blogging after 2013, since when regulatory issues have received a great deal of attention in the media. As a result, they may have been more motivated to learn about regulations and ethics governing the blogosphere.

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.7 Theme Five: Relationship with Readers

Figure 4.25: Responsibility to readership: all 307 respondents

Do you feel a responsibility to your readership when featuring sponsored products?

All Participants - 307

19%

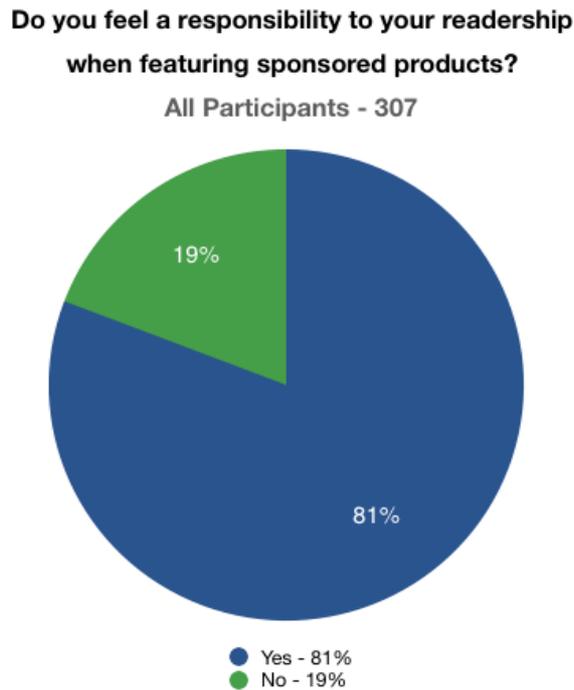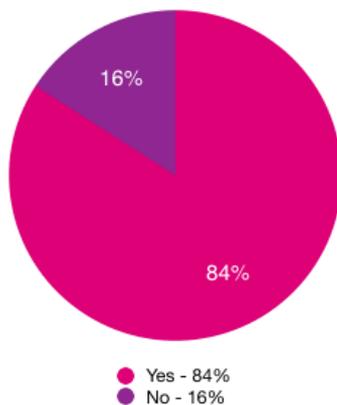81%

● Yes - 81%
● No - 19%

Figure 4.26 Responsibility to readership: results for each group:

Do you feel a responsibility to your readership when featuring sponsored products?
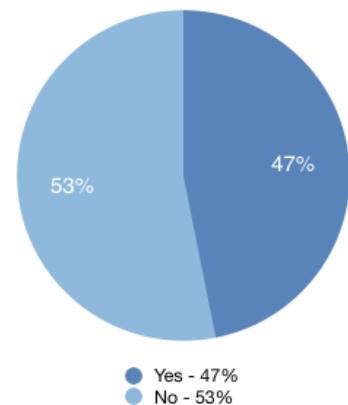**Active Younger Bloggers**

16%

84%

● Yes - 84%
● No - 16%

Do you feel a responsibility to your readership when featuring sponsored products?
Active Older Bloggers

13%

87%

● Yes - 87%
● No - 13%
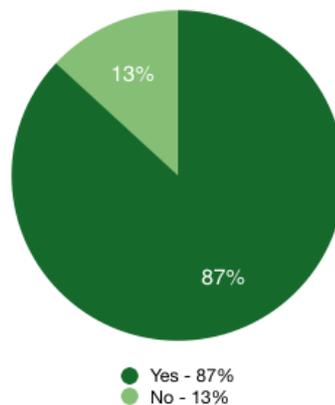
Do you feel a responsibility to your readership when featuring sponsored products?
Inactive Bloggers

53%

47%

● Yes - 47%
● No - 53%

When discussing the relationship that fashion bloggers have with their readership, a highly significant majority of respondents within the study [81%] claimed to feel

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a strong sense of responsibility to their blog readers, particularly when promoting sponsored products: *"I feel a huge sense of responsibility when posting sponsored content, I'm always trying to put myself in my readers' shoes and I hope I don't annoy them with my content"*. These participants recognised the need to maintain personal integrity when it came to accepting commercial involvement and emphasised the importance of maintaining reader trust. Interestingly, many of these respondents also expressed concern at offending readers through sponsored content: *"I am quite worried about some of the content that I post online, if it will get misinterpreted in the wrong way and I might offend someone. I make sure to read over my posts many times before I publish"* and *"I'm really worried that my readers will hate me when I post sponsored content, I don't want to lose any of the trust that have been built up over the years"*. Both the quotes above provide evidence that fashion bloggers give considerable thought to the impact that their post content might have upon readers and are sensitive to the potential damage that reader misconception might have upon their 'reputation' as trusted and authentic reviewers. Overall, many respondents commented that they would not jeopardise the relationship they had built with readers, just for the sake of free products, a finding observed by Lövheim (2013), Al-Saleh (2017) and Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget (2020).

However, a considerable number of all research participants [19%], and particularly over half of the respondents in the Inactive blogger group [53%], did not seem to share this wider sense of responsibility. Members of these groups expressed comments that suggested little sense of shared community feeling with an unseen, distant readership: *"I've never cared about what others have said, I always wrote content that I enjoyed and I was interested in, I never really thought about the readers to be honest"*. Participants in this group went on to make a number of statements indicating that they blogged primarily for their own sense of pleasure and to satisfy their own interests: they were blogging for themselves rather than for the enjoyment of others: *"I did not start my blog for any reader out there. I am aware of their opinions and what they might say, but at the end of the day, I'm posting stuff that I'm interested in and I want to post about.* In some cases, they offered a defiant justification for their views which stressed the

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

importance of their remaining independent of reader opinion. *If you are afraid of what your readers have to say, then you have become too influenced and censored, and that is not what the point of blogging is about"*. This kind of comment was particularly common amongst statements made by the Inactive blogger group: many of these respondent comments tended to give little regard to the thoughts and needs of those that chose to read their blog. Significantly, participants in the Inactive blogger group generally felt less of a responsibility to their readership, indicating that they had initially chosen to blog for their own personal reasons, to express their independent views about fashion and fashion developments, and had not set out wanting to make it a profitable career. This also suggests that building a relationship with blog readers was less important for individuals who did not want to turn their blogging activity into a full-time profession, and relationship building through blogging was less important to them. The data given earlier in this chapter confirms that overall participants in the Inactive blogger group had smaller followings in the 100-1001 range. The fact that their blog followings were relatively small and that their blog possibly therefore generated relatively little reader interaction and engagement may have been a demotivating factor that encouraged them to cease blogging.

By contrast, a significant number of respondents from within both the Active Younger blogger group [24%] and the Active Older blogger group [16%] expressed concern at the possibility that aspects of their blog content might offend readers. Some of these participants emphasised that, in order to avoid this, they consciously made efforts to avoid being overly personal, opinionated and/or political when writing content and sharing their blog posts online. Evidence of this is clearly illustrated by the following respondent comment which demonstrates the extent to which some fashion bloggers may self-discipline themselves and self-censor their output. She withheld her opinions on a topic that was of major significance for her as a result of her unwillingness to offend some readers and her awareness of the possible abuse she might receive: *"I get scared at the thought of offending some of my readers and it has sometimes stopped me from posting my views on matters that are important to me. For example, I really wanted to talk about the abortion referendum that was happening in Ireland last*

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year but I thought the topic too risqué to actually raise, I wrote a blog post about it but never published it. I have received hate over a review of a lipstick, so can you imagine what would happen if it was anything more serious?". This desire to manage and self-censor their blog output in order to avoid offending their readership connects with the unwillingness of many of these bloggers to post negative sponsored reviews discussed earlier. In both respects, the respondents' keenness to present a positive mask may be influenced by a fear of online trolling and/or be influenced again by commercial considerations. This eagerness to conform and appease is at odds with the perception that a key purpose of the blogosphere in its earlier days was to provide a platform for criticism and argument.

Many participants also described the ways in which they attempt to keep their blog content purely fashion related and quite detached from their real private, personal everyday life. One respondent explained her reason for this as wanting to avoid straying towards non-fashion topics and issues that might provoke offence and consequent criticism from readers: *"I don't feel the need to share any negative, personal things about my life, I like to keep it all positive and just related to fashion"*. Like many respondents in the study, avoiding any negative or controversial topics was an important strategy for keeping the atmosphere of her blog positive. Some respondents stressed the need to avoid alienating readers by making remarks that could be deemed controversial and they specifically identified politics as an area that they would try to avoid: *"I don't write anything about my personal opinions or views on things, like politics, that is a no-go area for me"*. Another respondent mentioned the care that she took to de-personalise her posts and to maintain a very clear distance between her online fashion persona from her real family life offline: *"I avoid posting anything too personal about my life online. I don't talk about my personal life, my family or kids. I see the blog as a very separate thing actually"*. Comments expressing this process of separating person from post were made by participants of all ages and in all three groups, and they were made in a clear, forthright way that illustrated the importance they attached to this aspect of their blogging habit.

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This reluctance by fashion bloggers to write posts that relate to personal and/or potentially controversial public issues for fear of readership backlash, expressed by a significant minority of the respondents, contrasts with many studies of the general blogosphere, including Klein, Ahlf and Sharma (2015), Wiazewicz and Zatwarnicka-Madura (2016) and Koivisto (2019), who have found considerable evidence for the view that bloggers tend to be strongly opinionated and are seldom neutral when sharing views and opinions.

Thus, one 25-year-old Active Younger participant who had been struggling with an illness gave careful thought to mentioning it in her fashion posts: while it might have been therapeutic for her and others to blog about this illness online, she was hesitant to do so in case it was problematic for individuals in her readership: "*I am not personal with what I talk about, a lot of my colleagues and clients follow me online and I don't really want to be putting stuff out there and then go into work the next day and them knowing everything about my life… you've got to stay professional when you are broadcasting your life in that way. For example, I have been getting treatment for an illness that I've had, and I keep wanting to talk about it as it might help and bring comfort to others and bring awareness, but… do I want to tell everyone about that? My colleagues and stuff…? No, I think once you do it, it almost sets a precedent*". This comment shows the degree of thought which this respondent has given to the conflict between her wish to share an aspect of her private life that might be helpful to her readers and her desire to remain a distinctly private person and to maintain her own professional blogging values. For this respondent, maintaining privacy, remaining true to her own personal sense of blogger professionalism, and thinking how her comments might be received by her readership were three interrelated aspects of her blogging practice which had a potential impact upon her voice as a blogger.

4.7.1 Negative comments from readers

Whilst reflecting on their relationship with readers, participants drawn from all three blogger groups [28%] expressed several shared concerns: they were aware of the potential difficulties that might ensue if their readership and the popularity

of their blog grew significantly in size beyond its existing level. Their comments expressed their worry that a larger audience might result in an increased number of hostile, critical responses from readers. There was also a fear of the additional pressures that they felt might come from the greater risk of negative public exposure and criticism, a view clearly expressed by this 26-year-old Inactive blogger: *"If I was to become a bigger blogger, I would be really worried, as you are just opening yourself up to be criticised online. I can see the pressure that would constantly be on your shoulders, and it's not for me".* This respondent clearly appreciated that blogging on a larger scale might bring new difficulties. It implied a negative change in atmosphere from the community chat of a small group of hobbyists to a potentially charged and possibly aggressive competitive environment.

Many of these participants expressed concern that, by developing their blogging into a more professional, full-time activity, they ran the risk of increasing the potential for direct online hostility, with one 24-year-old Active Younger blogger citing the example of the trolling suffered by Zoe Sugg (Zoella): *"I'm actually quite nervous for my blog to grow in size, as I just think the more popular you get, the more people hang on your every word and you're more likely to get negative comments and people trolling you – look at Zoella for example, everything she posts is ripped apart and scrutinised by millions of people, I don't think that would be fun"*. Comments of this kind often made a distinction between small-scale amateur blogging that was enjoyable and the potentially challenging reactions that professional bloggers have to endure. Several older respondents expressed their unwillingness to shoulder the responsibilities that came with writing posts for mass consumption: they preferred to remain the author of an essentially fun, hobbyist blog, a finding also discussed by Cole (2015), Orton-Johnson (2017) and Arrieta, Peña and Medina (2019). One 57-year-old referred to increased responsibility as an unwanted result of growing her blog: *"I think once you become more well-known in the industry, there is suddenly this level of responsibility that people expect from you, and that changes everything for me"*. This 62-year-old respondent was typical of older bloggers who were aware that growing their blog would almost inevitably mean that their posts would have to be less spontaneous

and more guarded: *"You are no longer just blogging for fun and writing any whimsical thought that pops into your head, you suddenly have this massive audience questioning everything, and I think I'm quite happy where I am right now, I wouldn't want to grow any bigger"*. One 26-year-old Inactive blogger also felt that bloggers had a particular responsibility to produce content that was helpful and suitable for younger readers. She was especially aware that the almost educational view of her role as a fashion blogger might stimulate unwanted pressures that she would not be able to deal with if her blog following increased considerably: *"I think bigger bloggers these days have such a huge responsibility on their shoulders because they will have a younger following that look up to them. They have such a responsibility of showing good character and guiding people in the right direction. I could not handle that kind of responsibility"*.

Nevertheless, despite this strong sense of caution, which was expressed by more than a quarter of all participants, only a very small percentage of participants [5%] from across all three groups revealed that they had actually received negative comments on their blog. Respondents who offered detail about having been the recipient of negative remarks indicated that they generally tended to receive criticism on their Instagram and YouTube accounts rather than on their main, traditional fashion blog: *"Yes, 100% of all the negative comments are now on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. YouTube is the most negative, nasty place"* and *"I have had negative comments, particularly on Instagram where it is easier to insult someone and then log off".* In fact, most participants agreed that comments posted to their blog were invariably positive in nature. Several participants suggested that this resulted from the fact that blogs were a niche medium largely accessed by other interested and like-minded bloggers who were attracted by its friendly atmosphere: *"The blogosphere has always been such a lovely place, it is full of other bloggers who understand what you are doing and why you are doing it"*.

By contrast, a number of respondents commented at length about the difference in tone and atmosphere between the traditional fashion blogosphere and other newer, simpler social-media sites. They recognised that this difference was due to

a number of factors, such as the size of the channels, the different type of connection between poster and reader, the different types of people who used media such as Instagram, and the general lack of involvement of channel users in the process of writing material. One 28-year-old Active Younger blogger succinctly summed up the views of a number of study respondents who had already developed a negative opinion of the newer social media: "*Instagram and the other channels like it, are often not pleasant places to visit*". Part of the problem lies in the fact that Instagram is a more open public site, a finding that correlates with Koivisto (2019). This 23-year-old participant suggested that hostility to bloggers on these open sites was stimulated by an envy of fashion bloggers, who were perceived to be 'doing well' out of the internet, an envy generated by people who did not appreciate the thought and skill that went into blogging: "*The other channels are full of people that are not bloggers and they think you just get sent free stuff without actually having to do anything for it, and it's far more nasty, negative and bitchy*". Respondents often identified that the difference between fashion blogs and, for example, Instagram, was to some extent due to the nature of the process required for producing content in these different channels: "*I think most people understand the objective of sites like Blogger and WordPress, and they understand that it is someone's diary and corner of the internet. But Instagram is different. Not everyone has a blog, but everyone has an Instagram account, and it's a bit of a free for all. Instagram is full of people that are not bloggers, so when they see bloggers, they don't realise that bloggers are using Instagram to support their blog and it's their career, and ignorant people feel that they have free rein over that and that they can comment with any nasty thing that pops into their head*". As this comment suggests, and as noted elsewhere in this study in different contexts, fashion bloggers were generally keen to differentiate their activity from involvement in other social channels. They were often keen to contrast their 'carefully crafted' product, which required specific skills and a high degree of extended commitment, with the 'simplistic' output on other channels such as Instagram.

Figure 4.27: Negative comments from readers

Have you ever received negative comments from readers?

All Participants - 307

- Yes - 5%
- No - 95%
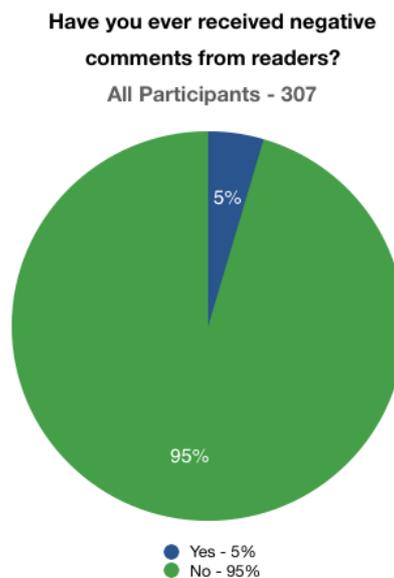
As the figure above indicates, almost all participants [95%] in the study stated that they themselves had not received any significant negative comment on their blog. However, in their comments, over a third of all participants [36%] seemed to be fearful of this happening at some point in the future. This was possibly because of the high degree of media attention given to the aggressive trolling that was directed towards successful, high-profile fashion bloggers, and in particular Zoella. Some respondents also suggested that bloggers within their own social networks had received hateful comments. They themselves expressed relief and gratitude that they had not in fact experienced any kind of distressing material. However, their comments revealed that they were aware of the problem, had reflected upon their likely attitude towards it, and appreciated that receiving abusive feedback would most probably have a strong impact on their decision whether or not to continue blogging: *"I've been very, very lucky. I've had none. One of my friends has had really negative comments and she's had to block people. I do wonder if it will happen to me at some point… it's a scary time, as I know how easy you can become a subject to trolling"* and *"I think if I got hate and nasty comments on my blog posts, I'd die. If that happened to me, I would just disappear and wouldn't want to blog again, as it would just be too upsetting"* and *"My friend received a lot of hate from readers on YouTube and she actually stopped blogging completely because of it. The comments really damaged her self-confidence, and I'm terrified of that happening to me one day"*. This last comment

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is the only instance throughout the study of someone ceasing to blog because of online abuse, but the language used in all three remarks indicates the level of anxiety felt by many respondents.

However, when reflecting upon this possibility of receiving negative responses on their blog or elsewhere online, a number of Active Younger blogger respondents [8%], made comments which indicated that they had given considerable thought to this aspect of internet-based communication and had formed clear opinions on why it happens and how they might respond: *"As a blogger, there is absolutely no reason why we should accept that and we have to stand up to that, report and block people, and never think about it again, because people lose their power when you don't engage with them".* Some respondents had developed a clear rationale as to why this was unacceptable online behaviour, making comparisons with everyday expectations of conduct in real life situations: *"There is this belief that if you put yourself out there online, you have to expect and accept the hate that comes your way. I think that is a horrific thing to say and utterly unacceptable… why are people so vile online? You would not insult someone in the street so why does it make it okay to do it online? It is not okay. I hate this statement: if you put yourself online, you have to expect hate. That just excuses bad behaviour".* As indicated by the quotes above, these participants expressed frustration and anger at the way in which leaving negative comments had come to be seen by many users as being normal practice and acceptable behaviour online, a development also observed by Eckert (2018) and Abidin (2019).

4.7.2 Reader reaction to sponsored content

When asked to reflect and comment upon the reaction of their readership towards sponsored content appearing on their fashion blog, a significant number of participants across all three groups [43%] indicated that they had received very few complaints about this aspect of their output: *"I never had a negative comment and nobody ever seemed annoyed by it, I don't think my readers cared at all if it was sponsored or not".* Other respondents noted that such comments that were made about sponsored content were almost always positive, readers tended to

enjoy the sponsored content, often acted upon the bloggers' product recommendations, and offered expressions of gratitude to the blogger for highlighting something that was useful: *"My readers don't seem to mind it at all, and I've had some really lovely feedback from people that tried a product after my sponsored review"*. Comments of this kind were also recorded by Hsu, Lin and Chiang (2013), Magno (2017) and Whitmer (2020). In particular, respondents noted that their readers were not just positive about the recommended product, but were often making a wider positive statement about how the inclusion of sponsored content was beneficial overall to the blog itself and to the skills and experience of the blogger: *"My followers are all really nice and seem happy to see me do well and get these experiences, I receive a lot of support and encouragement which is really nice, and I know I've inspired a few people to purchase items based on my reviews, and my readers have been grateful for that"*. Implicit in this comment is the sense that readers felt that fashion bloggers were offering them a service that was helpful and should be supported.

Many participants also believed that offering sponsored content provided both blogger and reader with learning and value opportunities. This approach had the potential to increase possibilities for creating interesting and engaging content by introducing readers to a variety of different products and brands, thereby potentially helping them in their purchasing decision-making process: *"I feel that my readers particularly enjoy reading and seeing sponsored blog posts. Having sponsored items allows me to expand my style and to experiment. My readers like seeing new and different things and they also feel quite proud of me receiving sponsored items"*. Participants believed that readers generally found sponsored content useful, and they commented on its value for the development of a sense of mutual self-interest between blogger and blog reader. The feeling that sponsored material was important as it added value to the readership experience is also noted by Hautz *et al* (2014), Cheng and Ho (2015) and Gunawan and Iskandar (2020).

Several respondents [21%] specifically indicated that the inclusion of sponsored content had not had a negative effect on the size of their following. In a number of cases its inclusion had in fact had a positive impact, as also suggested by Hwang

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and Jeong (2016), Neal (2017) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020): *"Well, they keep reading and coming back to the blog, so I guess they're okay with it? I've been fortunate to have some nice readers and my follower number continues to grow. If I'm honest, I don't think I've noticed any difference between the reaction to sponsored and non-sponsored content"*.

Respondents also offered comments which described and explained attitudes and behaviours in their practice that they felt were necessary in order to not alienate their readers. In this regard, many stressed the importance of being open and honest about the sponsored nature of featured products: *"As long as you're not lying to your audience and you are truthful about sponsorship, I think the readers understand and are happy to see it"*. Some participants were quite confident that they had established their trustworthiness in the eyes of their following: *"my readers knew I was always being honest with them, so they would respond in a positive way"*. In addition, many respondents maintained that regularly offering readers critical product reviews was an essential and fundamental aspect of their blogging practice: *"I always try and give my readers the pros and cons to the product, especially if they are going to spend their own money on something"*. The importance of being honest was frequently identified in their comments as a key element for retaining the respect of their readership: *"I'll never lie and I'll always give a critical review regardless of the brand"* and *"I've always published honest, unbiased opinions about products, and so I don't think any of my readers have a problem with it"*. These comments indicate that many respondents were fully aware of the moral standards that readers can expect of fashion bloggers. However, the emphasis upon blogger honesty inherent in these remarks is contradicted by the fact that almost 90% of the study group admitted to being very reluctant to post negative product reviews and to adopting the evasive strategies outlined in Theme Two.

Some research respondents also spoke of the need to take care to moderate the overall number of their sponsored posts in order not to aggravate readers with too much material of this kind, which correlates with the findings of Findlay (2014), Rossi (2016) and Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020): *"It's important to not feature too many sponsored posts in a row, as your blog will just*

come across as a rolling advertisement… you need to make sure to still post personal content and find that sweet balance that won't annoy readers".

4.7.2 Theme five discussion: relationship with readers

When featuring sponsored material, most of the research participants claimed that they felt a strong sense of responsibility towards their blog readers. Many respondents reiterated the need to remain truthful when featuring brands and reviewing products, in order to maintain their relationship with their readers and to retain their sense of integrity and authenticity. This relates to Lövheim (2013), Al-Saleh (2017) and Schouten, Jansen and Verspaget (2020), who found that bloggers who remain truthful and authentic when featuring sponsored material can develop stronger relationships with their readers which can help bloggers build a more loyal follower base.

Similarly, a number of research participants expressed the belief that the inclusion of sponsored material could provide benefits for their readers, as it can offer the possibility of more professional, interesting and engaging content. This finding confirms the work of Hsu, Lin and Chiang (2013), Magno (2017) and Whitmer (2020), who also found this to be the case when investigating blog-reader opinions on sponsored content. Participants in the current study also took the view that their readers welcomed a more diverse range of fashion-blog content, and appreciated the way in which sponsored material could help resolve personal purchasing decisions, discover new products and brands, and develop their own trend inspiration. These findings relate to Hwang and Jeong (2016), Neal (2017) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020), who found that consumer attitudes to general blog advertising were largely positive, and that blog readers were especially receptive to, and accepting of, sponsored content when they perceived that a distinct value could be gained from reading such material. Hautz *et al* (2014), Cheng and Ho (2015) and Gunawan and Iskandar (2020) also argue that readers can find sponsored blog material particularly valuable when it helps them with product information research and aspects of the purchasing decision process such as price and quality.

As indicated above, the majority of study respondents were conscious of the need to secure and retain their credibility in the eyes of their readership, particularly by adopting strategies based upon authenticity such as openly disclosing any

commercial relationships and inducements. The study findings also confirm that many bloggers appreciate the importance of maintaining blog style and tone in order to continue to satisfy their readers. Findlay (2014), Rossi (2016) and Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) suggested that bloggers balance promotional content with a consistent character narrative, focusing on both weaknesses and strengths of products being reviewed. Huang (2015) and Tang and Chang (2016) also suggest that, if readers suspect that blog product reviews are biased, they are more likely to downgrade the credibility of that posting and resist the persuasive intent of the message. Hahn and Lee (2014), Glucksman (2017) and Orton-Johnson (2017) argue that reader perception of a psychological closeness to, or connection with, 'their blogger' can also affect their attitudes towards blog credibility and authenticity. They emphasised that, to manage this aspect of their relationship with their readership, bloggers should maintain the narrative, character and style used throughout the history of the blog.

Armstrong and McAdams (2011) and Mortara and Roberti (2017:94) also stress the importance of adding a personal touch or 'real-life presence' to posts in order to maintain a trusted relationship with followers. Mortara and Roberti (2017:94) suggest that many readers can start to perceive a blogger as 'one of their closest friends', a para-social attachment identified and discussed by Horton and Wohl (1956). They noted that an audience can begin to consider media personalities as friends, despite having extremely limited interaction with them. Perceived closeness and experience gained through repeated exposure can encourage an audience to develop feelings of attraction, intimacy, friendship and identification. This can ultimately lead to the media personality having high levels of influence, both negative and positive, over audience purchasing behaviour and over how they perceive certain topics. More recent researchers, such as Arrieta, Peña and Medina (2019) and Foroudi, Nazarian and Aziz (2020), argue that bloggers may maintain a positive relationship with readers and increase the credibility of their blog, by balancing promotional messages with consistent character narrative and by referencing blogging community standards and communal norms. This is consistent with the research findings of this study.

However, it is worth noting that a small minority of the study participants did not share this overall sense of responsibility towards their readers. They clearly stated that they blogged in order to meet their own objectives, essentially for themselves and not for others, and tended to give little regard to their readers' opinions. The attitudes of this minority are at odds with the findings of studies such as Banet-Weiser (2012), Marwick (2014), Duffy (2017), McRae (2017) and Serazio (2017), who all emphasised the benefits that bloggers can gain from the relationship-building aspect of their interaction with their readers, and that valuing and incorporating reader feedback into their blog content has an overall beneficial effect. Nevertheless, the views of this small minority confirm some aspects of Callahan *et al* (2018), who examined blog motivation and found that many bloggers continue to blog primarily in order to serve personal growth, rather than for social ends such as connecting with others and/or establishing online relationships.

A number of respondents registered concern at the possibility that they might offend their readers and generate negative feedback if they included overly personal thoughts and opinions in their online output. They believed that avoiding this was an important consideration when they were planning and making decisions about blog content. Abidin (2019:201) also found evidence for this and noted how some fashion bloggers will adopt 'self-censorship' in order to avoid potentially becoming a victim of cyber-bullying. This willingness to moderate the tone of their blog output contradicts a number of studies, including Klein, Ahlf and Sharma (2015), Wiazewicz and Zatwarnicka-Madura (2016) and Koivisto (2019), who found instead that general bloggers often tended to be strongly opinionated individuals who were seldom neutral in their views: their clear partiality was an important element which gave blogs their distinctive appeal. The above studies suggested that some readers appreciated the independence of bloggers and consequently valued their thoughts and opinions which they viewed as being sincerely held. They would therefore often choose to spend time reading blogs rather than traditional media such as magazines, which were perceived to be more dependent upon the aims and needs of companies and their brands.

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Comments by a number of participants also implied that they feared the possible consequences of their blog becoming too large and too popular. They referred to the treatment of several very well-known celebrity bloggers by cyber bullies. This was clearly a concern despite the fact that they themselves had received minimal negative feedback. Blom (2017), Abidin (2019) and Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget (2020) note how fashion bloggers in particular often receive criticism from followers. To some extent this is the result of the specific nature of fashion blogging, where it is commonplace for bloggers to routinely share aspects of their taste, personality and personal life, and then invite readers/ consumers to comment freely upon these by posting feedback. Fashion-blog readers can often form strong attachments to bloggers and, by frequently responding to posts, can become involved in the process of criticising the products, the blog and, by extension, the blogger herself.

By contrast, Orton-Johnson (2017) and Arrieta, Peña and Medina (2019) identify the ways in which many bloggers are inspired and motivated to create much of their content as a result of continual dialogue with readers. This apparent reluctance for respondents to grow their blog also seems to contrast with the views expressed by many respondents in Theme One when reflecting upon blog motivations and long-term goals. A majority of participants described how they hoped to grow their blog into a full-time career and/or make a secondary income from the activity. However, an underlying concern about the consequences of blog expansion also featured in many respondent comments. As observed by Cole (2015), when bloggers do receive harsh criticism online, it can force them to reconsider the original motivations that led them to publish on blog platforms.

A number of participants indicated that the negative comments they had received tended to be published on other social-networking sites, such as YouTube and Instagram, rather than on their traditional blog. The respondents themselves put this down to the much greater number of people on these open public sites, many of whom were not bloggers themselves and therefore did not appreciate the accepted rules of etiquette within the fashion blogosphere. These critics did not always understand why bloggers were posting certain types of content and opinions: respondents suggested that these readers were more likely to be

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

negative simply because they did not have a blog or blog experience themselves. Those study participants who reflected on these issues often expressed frustration that aspects of common online practice had, as it were, affected what they believed was the more amicable, traditional atmosphere amongst bloggers. This finding relates to the work of Hänninen (2018), Eckart (2018), and Sokolova and Kefi (2020), who also found that bloggers frequently face criticism from others who are not bloggers themselves, have not been part of the blogosphere community, and simply see blogging as just another form of media advertising. Despite these external criticisms, Koivisto (2019) defended the activities and values of committed bloggers, arguing that they continue to be a distinct and crucial part of the fashion industry because they generate consumer interest, drive sales, raise consumer awareness of products and brands, and ultimately help to make fashion more accessible to the buying public.

Therefore, in response to Research Question Five [what impact, if any, do fashion bloggers think the inclusion of sponsored material has had on their perceived credibility and trust, particularly in the eyes of their followers?], the findings in the current study across the three groups suggest that bloggers themselves feel that the inclusion of sponsored material has had a limited effect on readers' perception of blog credibility, and that many respondents themselves remain confident in the product recommendations offered by their fellow fashion bloggers. There was a slight difference between the participant groups: respondents within the Inactive Blogger group admitted that, whilst blogging, they had felt less of a responsibility to their readership, as compared to the other two study groups. A number of Inactive bloggers indicated that they would blog purely for themselves, and that building a relationship with readers through their blogging activity was less important to them.

4.8 Theme Six: Similarities to Magazines

Figure 4.28: Similarities to magazines: all 307 respondents:
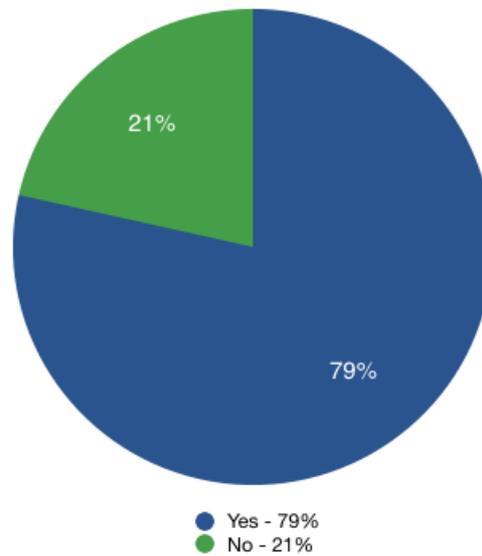
Figure 4.29: Similarities to magazines: results for each group:

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**
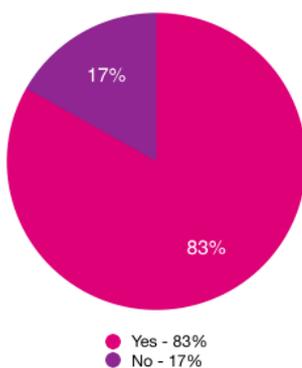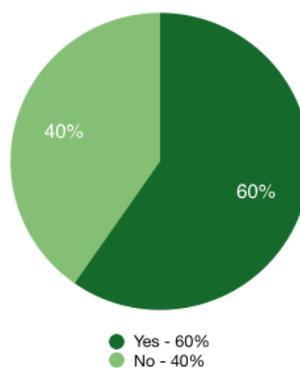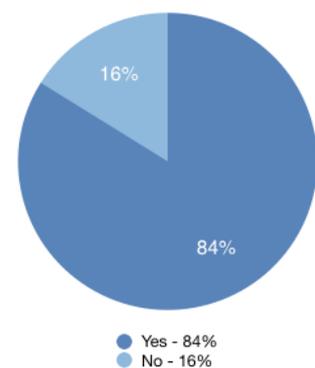
When participants were asked to reflect upon possible similarities between fashion blogs and traditional fashion magazines, a significant number of all respondents [79%] felt that it was possible to identify some points of difference and of similarity between these two forms of media. This was particularly the case in the responses made by Active Younger bloggers [83%] and the Inactive bloggers [84%]. When making comparisons between these forms of media, respondents in all three groups reflected upon their strengths and weaknesses as regards status, content, influence and credibility: *"I would say a lot of blogs out there have reached the same level as that of mainstream magazines, the level of writing and photography is on another level, it is editorial"* and *"blogs actually just look like magazines now, they feature the same number of adverts that magazines feature too, so no difference there"*. A common theme in participant responses was that, although blogs had initially promised to be a very different type of fashion information medium from magazines, over time differences between the two forms had blurred, as one 28-year-old Inactive blogger lamented: *"I know that a lot of blogs started out as a retaliation against traditional media and they were a more natural source of information. I stopped reading magazines entirely and would only read blogs. But now, there are so many professional bloggers, their content matches that of a magazine, it's incredibly commercial and I can't relate to a lot"* and *"I think they are very similar now; I find it hard to distinguish any difference"*. This gradual development of the blogosphere towards the forms and values of similar traditional media, such as magazines, is also noted by McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013), Ferreira and Vasconcelos (2017) and Lee *et al* (2017).

By contrast, a smaller but still significant percentage of participants across all three groups [21%] maintained that blogs and magazines were still very different types of media. These respondents offered a range of observations to support their opinion. Some felt that blogs tended to be more inclusive than high-end fashion magazines and could 'represent' a much wider range of readers: *"Blogs are inclusive, allowing people of all different shapes, sizes, ethnicities and disabilities to share their love and passion for fashion"*. A number of Active Young bloggers also felt that blogs tended to offer greater variety in terms of more readily available, instantly accessible content. They felt that they had more opportunities

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

to interact and form relationships with blog-material producers that seemed more authentic than was possible via the traditional forms of communication between reader and producer in the magazine industry: *"I think blogs are still very unique and are still different from magazines. I think this is something magazines are terrible at and they need to try to be more like blogs in my opinion".* This correlates with the kinds of comment that were noted in the studies undertaken by Panchal and Cassidy (2018) and Whitmer (2020).

Respondents frequently commented upon the way in which upper-end fashion magazines concentrate upon displaying and promoting luxurious and more expensive products, and aim to create a more elitist, aspirational form of media environment: *"I think magazines like Vogue offer luxurious, aspirational content that we will always enjoy consuming, but it's not something that I can relate to, so that's why blogs will always be different".* This particular group of participants also often commented that, compared with the dream aspirations of magazines, they felt that fashion blogs were more realistic in terms of their appeal to a wider range of ordinary consumers with a more limited budget: *"I still think blogs are very different from magazines. I think magazines have quite an elitist edge, I mean look at Vogue, the editors used to be related to royalty, and every item is designer, so I can only read and look at it for inspiration. For genuine outfit ideas and affordable pieces, you still need blogs for that".* While there were a number of comments that focused upon the distant, almost unattainable nature of the products that feature in upper-end magazines, others stressed that a key difference between fashion blog and magazine was the opportunity to interact in a more intimate way with individuals bloggers which is not possible with traditional mass media magazine: *"I think when you follow a blogger and read their blog, it's a much more personal thing and you feel as though you know that blogger so well, it's far more personal than any magazine".* These differences between these two main fashion media have also emerged for discussion in the work by Colliander and Dahlén (2011), Kaiser (2017) and Mole (2019).

Of the three groups participating in the study, Active Older bloggers [40%] tended to take the view that fashion blogs and magazines continue to be quite separate,

distinct media. A significant number indicated that they still place a high value on the industry expertise that underpins the mainstream commercial fashion magazine. For this group in particular, it was important that they could still continue to read magazines for expert opinion rather than turn to a blogger, especially when researching a potential high-value purchase: *"I still view the magazine editors as the experts, they know what they are talking about and I'll always seek them out first before making a big purchase"*. In the view of some respondents, fashion blogs potentially lacked some degree of the credibility and authenticity that was ensured by purchasing and reading a fashion magazine that has been edited professionally. Some respondents expressed the view that, in comparison with magazines, it was difficult to judge the expertise, authenticity and motives of individual bloggers: *"Magazines still have their place, in terms of fashion expertise. When I look at so many bloggers, they might be great at putting clothes together but they have most likely been paid to do it … and if we go back to authenticity, I feel that we're maybe having the wool pulled over our eyes. And I feel you don't get depth with any bloggers. You only get one story from a blogger, whereas a magazine will give you a wider story, a magazine can tell you so much more"*. The findings of Roca-Sales and Lopez-Garcia (2017) and Cano, Doyle and Zhang (2018) also agree that some consumers feel that magazines continue to have their place within the overall fashion industry offering, and that they could still be seen to be independent credible channels that provide in-depth education, advice and coverage of current developments in fashion: *"Magazines offer a much better understanding of upcoming trends and I still look to them for advice and expertise when it comes to new styles and key investments"*.

It is clear that many of the older participants in this study continue to value the strengths of fashion magazines more than the younger bloggers. This may be because the older bloggers have been acculturated towards reading and using fashion magazines, having lived through a period when magazines dominated the fashion sector. Significantly perhaps, almost all participants who commented upon magazines specifically referred to *Vogue*, an influential high-end magazine long famous for its professional coverage of fashion. The positive comments about magazines made by older participants may reflect the influence that magazines of

this type have had on their thinking. This may also help to explain the fact that these participants take the view that magazines can be as credible as blogs. By contrast, younger bloggers tended to be less influenced by magazines: they found them less inviting and inclusive than blogs, and particularly found it difficult to relate to premium publications such as *Vogue*.

4.8.1 Fashion journalists

Participants were asked to reflect and comment upon the ways in which the changing and increasingly professionalised nature of the blogosphere has impacted upon their view of themselves as producers of fashion content. A small but distinct group of Active Younger bloggers [13%] indicated that they have increasingly tended to view and refer to themselves in terms that suggest a greater degree of professional expertise such as 'fashion journalist'. Some have also adopted ways of describing themselves that emphasise their knowledge of the fashion industry, allow them to adopt a more authoritative pose in their output and suggest greater familiarity with the wider terminology of the online fashion industry. Respondents within this group often referred to themselves using expressions such as 'independent fashion journalist', 'fashion entrepreneur', 'fashion commentator', and 'online content creator'. Implicit in their comments was a desire to distance themselves from the use of the term 'blogger' which they associated with an earlier and more primitive form of online activity: *"I don't view myself as a blogger, I think what I offer my readers is more in line with fashion commentary"*.

These respondents drew a distinct difference between their activities, which they believed required a higher degree of professional expertise, and blogging, which carried amateur and/or negative connotations for them: *"I think the term 'blogger' is actually quite amateur now, I like to be seen as an independent fashion journalist"* and *"the term blogger is getting a bad reputation, so I can understand why someone would want to distance themselves from the term"*. In their view, traditional blogging was a simplistic exercise: *"I like to write article pieces and it's more than just a personal diary, so I don't use the term blogger"*. While they

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continued to use the mechanisms of the blog channel, many of these younger participants were clear in their reasons for feeling that their online activities deserved a more professional name, as they believed they were working at a higher, more professional level than simple blogging: *"The level of work that I produce, the content and photography, my work with brands… I would no longer class myself as a blogger, I like to think I have gone to the next level and I want to be viewed as a fashion journalist, or entrepreneur"*.

Across all three groups, a very significant majority of respondents [87%] overall expressed negative views about this development. Many participants in this category maintained that they are quite happy to continue calling themselves bloggers and defended the use of this historic term. In fact, many of these participants made derogatory comments about those individuals who have chosen to call themselves fashion journalists, such as this 28-year-old Active Younger blogger: *"Oh wow, I want to laugh at this. Let's be honest… this is laughable that some bloggers think they are journalists, to me, that is very delusional"*. Respondents who shared this view appreciated that fashion journalism genuinely required a degree of sustained professional training, expertise and experience. They understood that there was a distinct difference between bloggers and professional journalists, and they identified a number of factors, such as specific skills and experience required for membership of the latter group, a view clearly expressed by this 57-year-old Active Older blogger: *"Oh god no, I would never call any blogger a journalist, they have not had sufficient training or experience. The writing quality is not there, blogs don't have to be impartial or take that into consideration, whereas good fashion journalism in Vogue is a lot more considered, researched, they have access to people that the average person never will"*.

Other participants also emphasised the difference between amateur bloggers and professional journalists in terms of the level of education required, and they defended the superior status of those who had studied for a journalism degree, a point made by this 26-year-old Inactive blogger: *"I do think its lame when bloggers call themselves professional journalists. It must be annoying if you've done a four-year journalism degree, and someone who doesn't really know*

Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

anything can just come along and call themselves a journalist, when they are not qualified". Many of these participants reiterated that they were blogging for purely personal ends and/or rewards, and they were therefore happy and proud to continue using the term 'blogger', a tendency that has also been recorded by Simunic (2017) and Neumann (2018). This 25-year-old Active Younger blogger clearly agreed: *"I am a blogger and that is exactly what I do. It's a personal online dairy and that's what I've been doing all these years. I'm really proud and happy to call myself a blogger – not an editor, or journalist or whatever".*

A small group of respondents within the Inactive blogger group [28%] did however express some degree of reservation about the continuing use of the term 'blogger'. They indicated that, on occasion, they felt embarrassed and/or self-conscious to call themselves a blogger, largely as a result of the increased stigma and negative reputation attaching to bloggers generated by others in the fashion media, particularly commercial magazine editors conscious of the impact of new technologies on their circulation figures: *"I have in the past felt very self-conscious to call myself a blogger, as I know people might just laugh, roll their eyes and think it's quite pretentious. I think it would be embarrassing to call yourself a blogger to someone in person".*

A small number of all study participants [17%] were also wary of using the term 'influencer', which they felt carried its own negative connotations, a point also noted by Bryant and Lothian-McLean (2019) and Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright (2020). The term 'influencer' clearly lacked credibility and authenticity in the eyes of this 26-year-old Active Younger blogger who offered some reasons why she disliked the term: *"I think people don't like the term 'influencer' because it implies that they have influenced you into buying something you may not have bought before… it seems to be a dirty word because you feel like the blogger could be lying to you because they've been paid, and they want you to buy something you don't need. I think that might be the reason why girls are adopting different titles".* This comment illustrates the clear distinction that many participants made between the disinterested fashion blogger who can be trusted and the explicitly mercenary influencer who cannot.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

Overall, a considerable number of participant responses signalled the continuing sense of pride and belonging that membership of the 'fashion blogging tribe' has inspired in many of its members. Several respondents stressed their loyalty to that tribe by making a clear distinction between the organisational and writing skills and expertise needed for effective blogging, and the much simpler, lower-level skills needed for posting on largely image-based channels.

Participants from the Active Younger bloggers group [18%] also described the frustration that they can feel when casual users of other social media with no sustained experience of 'proper' fashion blogging, use the term to describe their own sporadic posting on channels such as Instagram: *"I can't stand it when people who don't have a blog, call themselves a blogger – all they have is an Instagram page, that is not the same as running a blog"*. These respondents complained that it was unfair to compare participation on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, that merely require short immediate uploads, with the creation and maintenance of a successful fashion blog, which requires a far more sustained degree of time, effort and expertise: *"Blogging takes such a lot of work, it's a huge commitment and other people think you just snap a quick picture and expect all the likes to pour in and it's nothing like that"*. Many of these respondents defended their background in blogging by stressing the special degree of personal dedication and commitment that it required: *"I do get annoyed when people who don't blog or have never even had a blog, call themselves a blogger because they have no understanding or appreciation of what goes into a blog, all the behind the scenes hours sat at your laptop, for very little reward half the time"*. This is an aspect of fashion blogger attitudes that does not seem to have received much attention to date in the literature.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.8.2 Theme six discussion: similarities to magazines

A number of participants within the study revealed that they still view fashion blogs as being a credible form of online media and would regularly compare them to the products of the traditional fashion magazine industry. This finding supports the findings of Ferreira and Vasconcelos (2017), who argue that consumers are increasingly viewing blogs as a new form of commercialised media, and that there are significant signs of convergence between the two media forms, in terms of content, expertise and professionalism. Lee *et al* (2017) also found that, due to the rise in blog commercialisation and professionalism, consumers increasingly viewed fashion blogs simply as online versions of magazines, but found it harder to relate to the more personal aspects of blogs that had originally been one of the sources of their success and attraction to readers.

However, this finding is challenged to a certain extent by studies such as Wojdynski and Evans (2016) and Kim *et al* (2020), who argue that blogs continue to offer a unique offering, distinct from other forms of paid media, and that they can provide readers with a more authentic narrative of fashion. Kaiser (2017) Panchal and Cassidy (2018) and Mole (2019) also found that many consumers continue to place greater levels of trust and credibility in an 'independent' fashion blogger, rather than in fashion magazines. Similarly, when investigating continuing interest in personal fashion blogs, Whitmer (2020:7) found that consumers cited several reasons why blogs might still be preferable over traditional fashion media. This included factors such as: the fact that successful blogs are updated very frequently, blogs can provide instant real-time content as compared to monthly magazines, many consumers prefer the convenience of digital content to paper products, and many consumers continue to value the personal relationship that can be developed with an individual blogger who is perceived as an 'authentic "real" person'. The findings of this current study confirm this work.

Nevertheless, a number of study participants, and predominantly those within the Active Older blogger group [40%], provided viewpoints which argued that fashion

magazines could still offer a more elite, luxurious environment which helps to distinguish them from more everyday blogs. This relates to the work of Colliander and Dahlen (2011) and Kaiser (2017), who argue that, with their superior resources and expertise, magazines still offer escapism and inspiration to consumers, through items such as professional photoshoots with well-known celebrities that cannot be matched even by the most professional elements in the blog sector. Participants also added that, in addition to the marketing pull of celebrities, magazines can still offer a range of expert fashion advice and guidance and have access to a vast range of up-market products which are unlikely to feature on individual blogs. This correlates with Roca-Sales and Lopez-Garcia (2017) and Cano, Doyle and Zhang (2018), who argue that consumers continue to value expert opinions on fashion pieces and trends and continue to be curious about their thoughts and opinions.

Over time, as the fashion blogosphere has developed and professionalised, many fashion bloggers have adopted a number of new, different terms to describe their online activity. These include fashion journalist, fashion entrepreneur, fashion commentator and online content creator. This trend was observed both by Marwick (2013) and Rocamora (2018), who were interested in the growing professionalism of bloggers and found that this process was signalled by the use of more professional business titles rather than the humble blogger. Whitmer (2020) implies that this may be a successful strategy as blog readers may prefer to orientate towards individuals who are perceived as having greater knowledge and expertise. Whitmer also found that consumers increasingly disengage from bloggers that seem too 'amateurish'.

A small number of study respondents also said that they increasingly avoided using terms such as 'blogger', and in particular 'influencer'. As indicated earlier, this second term was particularly disliked because it generally tended to describe a type of online communicator who was ultimately motivated by selling both herself and products. The term 'influencer' had also attracted negative connotations as a result of criticism by media and industry experts who pointed

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to a lack of accountability in their practice such as a consistent failure to declare their promotion of sponsored items (Bryant and Lothian-McLean, 2019).

Consumer perceptions of the term 'influencer' were also particularly negative and many preferred to interact with users who did not go by this title (Gilbert, Childers and Boatwright, 2020). However, a significant majority of study respondents were happy to continue calling themselves 'blogger' and offered positive reasons to defend their preferred use of the term. This finding relates to Simunic (2017) and Neumann (2018), who observed that many individuals can feel protective towards the use of the word 'blogger' and are happy to remain using it, as for them it is a cherished part of their fashion identity and self-presentation online.

Therefore, in response to Research Question 6 [how has their own perception of the status of blogging and of themselves as bloggers changed over time?], overall the majority of respondents drawn from all groups were happy and proud to continue to call themselves 'blogger'. Many of these participants vigorously defended the use of the traditional term 'fashion blogger' as best suiting and describing their activities. A small number of participants within the Active Younger blogger group have adopted more professional titles, such as 'fashion journalist', in order to reflect what they consider to be a higher-level of activity than the original, hobbyist diary-based forms of blogging. Moreover, they have begun to distance themselves from the term 'blogger' due to its potential amateur and negative connotations. A significant number of respondents across the three groups [79%] also agreed that there are increased similarities between high-profile blogs and fashion magazines. They felt that the two media have blended to some extent, particularly in terms of influence and credibility. A smaller number of respondents still view the two media as very separate, with fashion blogs and fashion magazines offering a different service about different products and often to different audiences, even though consumers of both media continue to be interested in both ways of gathering fashion information. These respondents take the view that fashion blogs can offer more readily available, relevant content as opposed to magazines, and that readers have the opportunity to forge deeper, more meaningful, relationships with a blogger, as opposed to a fashion editor.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

However, many study participants, particularly among the Active Older blogger group, still rely upon the expert fashion knowledge and advice of fashion journalists, more than that of a blogger, especially when considering a high-value purchase.

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Active Younger Bloggers: **Pink**   Active Older Bloggers: **Green**   Inactive Bloggers: **Blue**

4.9 Chapter Summary

The data analysis suggests that the choice of methodology for this study was appropriate. Both of the adopted research methods, online questionnaire and in-depth interviews, generated a wealth of relevant information, opinions and perspectives from participants with considerable experience as readers and producers of fashion blogs.

The analysis also suggests that the research topic is a current and significant issue in the fashion-blog sector. It was clear from the findings that participants had previously been thinking about these issues, which resulted in an abundance of in-depth answers to both the questionnaire and the interviews. This indicates the willingness of bloggers to participate and share their opinions and views about the issues underpinning this research topic and suggests that they are at the forefront of many bloggers' concerns.

In line with objectives 3-6 stated in the introduction, the study has analysed the impact that the inclusion of sponsored content has had upon the practice and perceptions of fashion bloggers themselves with respect to their credibility and authenticity. The study has evaluated similarities and differences between the target blogger groups with particular attention paid to the views and decisions of inactive bloggers. It has also examined the ways in which many fashion bloggers have managed changes in their practice and developed ways of explaining and defending these.

The next chapter will conclude the thesis by highlighting key research contributions to knowledge, identifying research limitations and proposing recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate the credibility of fashion blogger sponsored content, with particular focus on blogger perspectives on the tensions between authenticity and commercialisation. This chapter will conclude the study by discussing how the thesis contributes to knowledge in the field of fashion blogging and online sponsorship. This chapter will also consider the limitations of the study and suggest recommendations and potential areas of further research.

In particular, this conclusion focuses upon the three key areas where a new contribution to knowledge has been made as regards the study of behaviour of UK female fashion bloggers: changes to fashion-blogger motivation, practice and community; the infiltration of the fashion blogosphere by commercial media and the ways in which this has affected blogger perception of their identify and their role; and the impact upon the personal wellbeing and mental health of some fashion bloggers.

5.1 Summary of work

In order to address research objectives one and two, an extensive review was undertaken in order to identify prominent themes within the relevant literature. The review provided a solid base on which further investigation could be conducted and helped to formulate a set of research questions.

To satisfy the aims of research objectives three to six, an appropriate methodology was selected in the form of an interpretivist, qualitative research approach, with the use of an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The results show that these methods were valid ways in which to question a group of suitable research participants, and the combination of these methods was effective in generating an abundance of useful data.

The research data was then analysed thematically utilising NVivo11 technology, and six prominent themes emerged. These themes were analysed and discussed in turn, with links to key literature. Research participant comments and pie charts were also used to help illustrate the results found in the qualitative data.

5.2 Contribution to knowledge

This study makes a contribution to the existing literature relating to the field of fashion blogging in a number of ways. Whereas much of the existing literature researches aspects of the blogosphere by examining the views and attitudes of fashion-blog readers, this study is specifically focused on gathering and analysing comments from the producers of fashion-blog content, and it does so with particular regard to the possible tensions that fashion bloggers can experience when trying to balance the conflicting pressures between credibility and commercialisation.

The specific emphasis in this study upon the fashion blogger point of view helps make a particular contribution to this aspect of general blogging literature, which is largely concerned with examining comments gleaned from blog readers. There seems to be relatively limited published research which specifically examines issues in the fashion blogosphere from the viewpoint of fashion bloggers themselves, and very little in the literature which is structured around recording and comparing the differing attitudes of the three groups selected for this study i.e. younger, older and inactive bloggers. The study has provided a particular opportunity to examine the views of older bloggers and to contrast these with younger and inactive participants in the activity. In addition, given that all of the participants in this study were female, the findings also contribute to our general understanding as to how women use the internet, the strategies that they employ to take advantage of its potential but also the difficulties and pressures that such involvement often generates.

Over the last three decades, the fashion blogosphere has matured from a small pioneering community into a powerful medium that makes an increasingly significant contribution to global advertising. Despite this dynamic change, individual fashion bloggers continue to exert some degree of influence over consumer behaviour. It is therefore important to regularly review the opinions and attitudes of fashion bloggers themselves, not just their readers, particularly as regards key developments in the sector such as increased commercialisation and professionalism. The thematic blogger comments and the observations drawn from them may be of interest to industry-based constituents such as digital

marketers and sponsors with an interest in working with bloggers in a commercialised way. This study may also be of value to fashion bloggers themselves and other members of the blogosphere in helping them to understand the potential benefits and difficulties of working in this dynamic but challenging sector.

This study has harvested and analysed fashion-blogger responses to questions that relate to a number of relevant themes: initial motivation to blog and how this has changed over time, in part as a response to the emergence of sponsorship; the impact that the increased inclusion of sponsorship has had on blogger style, content and output; the pressures, both external and self-induced, that bloggers face as a result of their relationships with sponsors; the changing nature of bloggers' relationships with, and their responsibility to, their online readership, and the similarities and differences between blogs and fashion magazines.

From the fashion blogger responses to these themes, three key areas of change that offer new findings have been distilled: changes to fashion-blogger motivation, practice and community; the infiltration of the fashion blogosphere by commercial media and the ways in which this has affected blogger perception of their identify and their role; and the impact upon the personal wellbeing and mental health of some fashion bloggers. These areas of research have been discussed in turn below.

5.2.1 Changes to fashion-blogger motivation, practice, and community

From the findings, it is clear that the inclusion of sponsorship within the fashion blogosphere has had a considerable impact on fashion-blogger motivation, practice and the overall community.

While approximately a third of participants continued to cite personal reasons as their principal motivating factor, the findings of this study confirm that there has been a distinct shift towards more commercialised motivations to blog. Many study participants, particularly those within the Active Younger blogger grouping, have become increasingly concerned with attracting monetary opportunities and even establishing a full-time career through the activity. A significant number of these younger participants revealed that they have always been more motivated by the potential rewards that can be gained from fashion blogging.

The study findings also confirm that some bloggers feel increasingly incentivised by material rewards, and that this has become a strong motivational force to continue with the activity. Some active participants also stated that without continual commercial involvement, they might have ceased blogging altogether. This suggests that social motivations are no longer sufficient in motivating some individuals to continue with the activity.

Other participants appreciated the technical, CV-enhancing skills that they could gain from fashion blogging and saw this as effectively contributing to their overall career development and employability. Participation in blogging has become an advantageous CV point: blogging can provide individuals with opportunities to gain practical digital experience that can be applied to relevant industries. Many participants indicated that the motivation to blog stemmed from a longer-term plan that promised eventual financial benefits through personal development rather than/ in addition to the more immediate reward of sponsored gifts from companies. Many were driven to blog in order to demonstrate their commitment and dedication to online fashion activity and gain the level of digital skills that are sought by relevant employers. Sustained fashion blogging provided an opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency in content creation, website design and social-

media management by evidencing that they have gained their own relevant experience and the ability to work independently.

Fashion bloggers also felt technical skills development offered more than simply a way to enhance their employability and demonstrate to potential employers their interest in following a career in this area. For many, fashion blogging had a significant impact on their general personal confidence, allowing them to develop greater expertise in writing and photography as well as acquiring greater familiarity with relevant software. Many respondents commented on the fact that this personal development had had an overall impact on their self-perception and confidence.

When discussing their long-term goals for blogging, many participants commented not just on the possibility of exploiting monetary opportunities, but also voiced their desire to be viewed as successful, influential figures within the fashion blogosphere. These individuals expressed their future goal of transforming their blog into a digital brand in imitation of other leading online figures. These ambitions represent a distinct change within the fashion blogosphere. Whilst a small group of participants from all three groups continued to note reader interaction and positive feedback as 'successful' factors when blogging, the findings of this study highlight that feelings of success are now heavily associated with brand collaborations and sponsorship involvement. The majority of participants confirmed that the inclusion of sponsorship in their fashion blog was a strong 'success' factor that greatly contributed to blogger recognition and evidence of their dedication. These respondents agreed that commercial involvement can help to enhance a bloggers' position in the sector, as well as making a positive contribution towards their perceived overall credibility as a reliable source of fashion content. The participant comments indicate that sponsorship opportunities can make individuals feel as though they are achieving blogging milestones: that they are making progress in their technical skills and professional performance, that they are attracting attention from well-known, respected fashion brands, that they are being recognised by their blogging peers, and that, overall, they are increasingly being viewed as credible, valuable fashion commentators.

Nevertheless, a significant minority of participants across all three groups cited wholly personal and social reasons as the main driver for their blogging activity: these participants 'blogged for themselves'. It was important for those respondents to create fashion content of which they could be proud and which they felt would be helpful for their readership. Within this group of value-driven and more community-minded participants, a number referred to the concept of influence in their comments but consistently did so in terms of building longer-term relationships with their readers rather than in a commercial context. They used the vocabulary of influence and influencers, but did so when referring to their relationship with blog readers who were looking for fashion and style advice. Their sense of influencing was based upon an educative desire to guide and help others, rather than influencing simply to promote a product and get a sale.

The study particularly examined respondents' attitudes and feelings when first offered an opportunity to collaborate with a brand. Their comments often demonstrated mixed feelings, suggesting that many of the participants were conscious that their role and their relationship with readers was potentially subject to change. Most responded enthusiastically to their involvement with sponsorship. However, a considerable number of respondents, particularly from the Active Older group, indicated that they preferred to accept sponsored material only when they felt that the products on offer were a good match for the existing tone, quality and content of their blog posts: evidence that they clearly had given thought and consideration to this new aspect of their blogging. Participants often also offered a number of additional reasons that helped them to confirm this decision: it was important to them that the offer was made by a company that they had shopped with before, that the offered products were relevant to fashion-blog themes of current interest to them, and/or the products were of a standard, quality and price that the blogger herself was happy to accept and showcase. These qualifications indicate that these respondents were thinking about this new direction in their hobby and were also trying to reconcile the fact that they were becoming involved in a commercial relationship with their desire to maintain a sense of their original, authentic motivation.

The most preferred type of sponsored involvement was sponsored branded posts. Using this approach allowed many fashion bloggers to feel that they were retaining

control over content such as text and images and that they could therefore shape the sponsored post to ensure that it was an authentic fit with their blog theme and style. They were not just doing what the sponsor required. Adopting this attitude towards sponsored posts allowed many respondents to reconcile the fact that they were now in a commercial relationship with brands but still maintaining acceptable blogger practices and value.

A small number of participants particularly valued the opportunity to work with companies and brands involved in the fashion industry but located in their local area. They saw this as a valid way of using their blogging platform and skills to support the local economy. This was not only helpful to the companies involved but also a source of personal satisfaction and reward for the blogger. They saw value in working with smaller label brands rather than with the more lucrative commercial interaction with big-label companies. Underlying their comments was the sense that, although they were involved with sponsored fashion items, their actions were beneficial to the local community and therefore, in some way, more communitarian and authentic.

Other participants emphasised their belief that there were benefits from continuously working with one particular brand and becoming a long-term brand ambassador. They felt that consistently showcasing products from that company indicated that they had a genuine preference for its items. They argued that such extended collaborations encouraged readers to appreciate that their showcasing of the brand's products stemmed from an authentic and credible interest in them, rather than being merely influenced by the potential rewards of commercial involvement. Significantly, none of these participants made comments that they were aware of potential drawbacks in this approach, such as becoming over-reliant on posting about one brand and its products. They were happy to maintain their position that their practice of collaborating with one selected sponsor was credible and did not diminish the authenticity of their output.

In their comments, many participants indicated their belief that the social, community-focused aspects of the early fashion blogosphere was being eroded by the commercialisation of the sector. However, personal satisfactions from blogging through social and community relationships were still important for many

practitioners, especially among older bloggers who continued to enjoy interacting with their readers and fellow bloggers.

In contrast, these factors were valued far less by younger participants. Comments by Inactive bloggers also showed that, whilst still blogging, their views had generally gone in the same direction. In many cases, members of these groups felt that the social aspects of the fashion blogosphere, which may have attracted them to the sector in the first place, had eroded to some degree, leaving instead a more professionalised sector that seemed increasingly competitive, saturated and less amicable. Many participants felt nostalgic for the atmosphere of the early community blogosphere, although few of them had in fact been active bloggers in that imagined 'golden age', which they remembered as being akin to a sisterhood. In fact, the majority of inactive bloggers cited increased commercialisation as their principal reason for ceasing to blog. Professional interactions with brands had also encouraged various new forms of pressure, some self-induced, others the result of comparing their own output with that of competitor bloggers. The study also identified instances of direct interpersonal conflict that were underpinned by a clash of blogger values between the communitarian and the commercial.

This is far removed from what was originally perceived as a supportive online community. This feeling of competition and dissatisfaction within the fashion blogging community was evidenced by many participants, who admitted a high degree of frustration with other bloggers online. Their comments were often heavily judgemental when discussing aspects of fashion blogger behaviour that was seen as unethical such as: not disclosing sponsored material, purchasing fake followers, exaggerating previous experience to sponsors, taking free items from brands but not creating and posting content about them, and overdependence upon photoshop to create unrealistic images.

Some were also particularly unhappy with the appearance of new online individuals, often younger, who described themselves as fashion bloggers yet did not adhere to traditional blogging norms and values: they did not maintain a blog but simply posted images on newer social channels such as Twitter and Instagram. Respondents criticised their lack of understanding of what truly credible and authentic fashion blogging entailed and were concerned by the way in which these

newer bloggers were damaging the trust of readers in blogging as a reliable medium. Poor practice by these newer entrants was stimulating negative attitudes towards blogging in the wider media.

Several respondents had reported what they saw as poor behaviour by other 'bloggers' to the ASA and were disappointed and deflated that nothing had come from this. Implicit in many participants' comments was the feeling that their much-loved hobby was being corrupted and that this unwelcome process was likely to continue. This was inevitably leading many to feel disillusioned, increasingly detached from an activity that they had originally really enjoyed, and therefore more likely to discontinue blogging. Others had just accepted that regulating the fashion blogosphere was a difficult task to do and that commercialisation was simply part of its evolution. Some aspects of these shifts in practice and values, and the evidence of 'inter-blogger' hostility and dispute, have received limited coverage in the literature.

The study also attempted to investigate fashion-blogger discussion of their sense of connection with, and responsibility for, their readers. The majority claimed to feel a degree of responsibility to their readers, particularly when promoting sponsored items. Many expressed the view that they had an affinity with their readers. They argued that, over time, they had built up trust with them based upon integrity and did not wish to dilute or lose it. As a result, many claimed to take considerable care to ensure that their content did not have a detrimental impact upon that relationship.

However, this was not the case with regard to a significant number of respondents, particularly Inactive bloggers, who did not share the same sense of responsibility. Almost all members of this group admitted that they lacked a shared sense of community feeling with their 'unseen readership'. In contrast, they blogged, or had blogged, for their own pleasure and interest, rather than for the enjoyment of others, and paid little regard to their readers' opinions. This was reflected in the fact that most of the Inactive participants chose to create blogs that were fundamentally diaries that recorded their fashion choices rather than primarily journalistic pieces for public consumption. Participants with these views often indicated that, from the outset, they had not intended to make a career out of

blogging. Building relationships with readers was much less important for this inactive group, and they had had smaller followings than most of the other respondents. This suggests that their blogs lacked interaction and engagement, which could be one reason why they ceased the activity. Brand building was simply not important to them either. These remarks are particularly significant given the general lack of focus upon the opinions of inactive bloggers in the literature.

Overall, this study explores a number of ways in which the fashion element of the blogosphere has evolved in recent years, and which suggest potential future trends and changes. The fashion blogosphere seems likely to continue to develop in terms of professionalisation and commercialisation, with companies increasingly investing in bloggers due to their particular reach into, and popularity with, target audiences, and the clear willingness of bloggers to be involved in sponsorship partnerships. As a result, fashion blogging may increasingly become an activity that attracts participants who are primarily seeking material rewards, either from full-time professional blogging or as a part-time, second income.

There has already been considerable migration within the fashion blogosphere from textual to more image-driven forms of communication. The attraction for both producers and consumers of online fashion content, of platforms that are largely based upon visual content supported at most by digestible, short-form text comment, has been noted. This drift away from textual communication towards the graphic is likely to continue given the interest in younger bloggers and consumers in using easier, faster and potentially more rewarding visual media.

While photo-based commerce can have an immediate global reach, text-based blogging requires a considerable commitment in terms of time, thought and effort, both to produce and consume. One consequence of this is that the traditional diary-based form of fashion blogging may possibly become a relatively niche activity and, as its practitioners age, a legacy one. Any development in this direction may also have implications for the commercial appeal of this type of output. Any further shrinkage in the traditional fashion-blog sector is likely to have a negative impact on the attitude of sponsoring companies, lessening their interest in the 'community blogging' sector. Reducing any potential material benefit from fashion blogging may have an effect on the numbers and the type of person

attracted to the activity. Arguably a return to a more amateur approach amongst dedicated fashion bloggers could have a beneficial impact on the overall quality of blog posts. A more communitarian atmosphere might also help decrease the sense of friction that some bloggers experience from feeling in competition with one another in order to secure brand collaborations.

As high technical and presentational standards required by sponsoring companies become ever more crucial, new entrants to blogging may feel unequal to the challenge and be discouraged by the time and effort required to pursue the activity. Rather than a hobby, fashion blogging may increasingly appear to be a full-time profession: it may no longer be viewed as a pastime but instead as part-time work experience. In addition, as suggested by some study participants, individuals may feel that they are not 'good enough' to be fashion bloggers due to rising standards of polished, professional output. These participants in the study already appreciated that they would never reach the required levels of prowess and success and that becoming a global influencer was unlikely.

Conversely, a fall in the overall numbers of fashion bloggers might encourage a resurgence of a more authentic 'traditional' approach. Concern at the ever-growing influence of sponsorship combined with a perhaps manufactured nostalgia for a perceived 'purer' original blogosphere was a recurring feature in the comments of many respondents.

5.2.2 The infiltration of the fashion blogosphere by commercial media

As well as affecting fashion-blogger motivations, the growth of sponsorship has also had an impact on the ways in which bloggers communicate with their readership. Some participants reported how their writing style had been affected: they felt that adopting a sponsorship role required them to develop a more advertorial approach that was more commercialised and uncritical. These participants were conscious that fashion blogging was changing and that a professional tone was increasingly necessary for 'effective blogging'. However, several described the tension and guilt that they had felt as a result of making changes to their output which required them to use a more artificial, less authentic voice. In some cases, they had felt the need to revisit and amend their blog material. Many participants felt a degree of regret at having accepted sponsorship. They cited pressure from brands to alter their content, accept deadlines and posting targets, and on occasion mask the fact that featured items were gifts from the sponsoring brand. Moreover, they referred to a self-induced pressure to please brands, often having to do so without clear guidance from the sponsor.

One commonly observed consequence of the shift towards sponsored fashion blogging was an increase in self-censorship. Many respondents in all three groups referred to their reluctance to share information content that might be deemed controversial and might possibly offend their readers. These participants therefore avoided being overly personal, opinionated or expressing political views, preferring to keep their blog atmosphere positive. Many took steps to de-personalise their posts in order to distance their real offline family life from their online fashion persona. They frequently defended this behaviour by citing their fear of potential backlash, criticism and/or cyber bullying. There was also an increased reluctance to post negative reviews of sponsored material: a large majority claimed to have never posted a negative review. Many felt a strong sense of obligation to the brand and that their duty was to promote its products in a positive manner, ensuring that their review did not affect the brand in an adverse way. They often felt a reluctance to be critical of products that they had received for free and were aware that, although they might not approve of a particular fashion item, it might be of interest to their readers. Indeed, many fashion bloggers admitted that they had posted a positive review of a product that they

actually disliked. When faced with this predicament, others admitted that they had evaded the problem by simply posting nothing. Respondents who acted in this way frequently defended their actions by claiming that their priority had been maintaining the overall credibility of their blog and the trust of their readers. Others admitted that their avoidance of negative reviews and/ or their resort to non-posting in these situations was influenced by a concern that it might jeopardise the potential for future sponsorship opportunities. These bloggers clearly felt that their posts were almost certainly being read by a range of companies with a potential interest in identifying suitable blogs for advertising purposes.

Many bloggers who accepted sponsorship described their 'duty as a blogger' to be promoting items as well as they could, regardless of their own personal views. They accepted that they had entered into a business relationship with sponsors and stressed the obligation that they felt to act as if they were almost in an official contract with the sponsor. Many respondents felt that their fashion blogging activities had increasingly become similar to the duties performed by a professional marketing agency: when dealing with problem products, they first referred to the supplier to solve the problem rather than sharing it with their readers. These bloggers no longer saw their primary function as providing critical communication with fellow reader-consumers but as maintaining a fluid business relationship with suppliers.

Many respondents also revealed that they had not always disclosed that material featured in their blog was gifted by sponsors, effectively placing the expectations of their supplier above those of their readers. Some admitted a degree of guilt at this behaviour, but defended it by saying that they had been new to blogging and relatively unaware of the disclosure guidelines, which in any case were unclear or unknown to them. Many admitted that they had not considered the impact that accepting sponsorship could have on their authentic voice and credibility. They had been over enthusiastic and blindsided by the attraction of the commercial opportunity.

In contrast, a small number of respondents continued to post critical product reviews as they felt this was the fundamental purpose of a fashion blog and what

their readers expected. They valued reader trust above commercial reward and were unwilling to dilute their authentic voice.

Overall, a quarter of participants had no experience of including sponsored material on their blog: many of these had refused sponsorship offers. Their reasons included personal blogging beliefs, the unwillingness to become involved with brands and their excessive demands, and a concern to retain their loyal readership. Many of their comments indicated that they placed a higher value on their blogging independence and authenticity rather than upon random free products.

However, the majority of respondents from all three groups generally took a moderate, selective approach to the opportunities of sponsorship. In many cases they self-policed their postings by developing their own set of personal rules and guidelines by which to manage the general impression that their blog material made upon the readership. They took care to ensure that sponsored products matched the tone of their blog and rejected inappropriate items, they limited items by type and frequency, only accepting products that helped to sustain the original authentic voice which was expected by their readership, and they maintained a balance in their blog content between sponsored and non-sponsored posts. Many justified this behaviour by saying that they felt they were acting in an ethical, honest way. Some of these participants may have set these self-created rules as a result of their greater awareness of ASA guidelines. They may also have been responding to the very high-profile cases of bloggers being fined for infringing these regulations, which received considerable attention in the mainstream media. However, it could be argued that the impetus behind this self-regulation of sponsored blog content may have been to disguise the wider extent of their commercial activity across the whole range of their social channels, a practice clearly implicit in several of the comments offered in the study.

There was also a clear educative impulse in many of the comments, with respondents referring to the need to protect younger and newer bloggers from possible exploitation from brands. Many expressed a feeling of duty of care to inexperienced entrants to the fashion blogosphere. Implicit in these views is the fact that a substantial minority of respondents still continue to believe that a

fundamental purpose of fashion-blogging feedback should be to report honestly about products and provide a trusted alternative to company advertising. A consistent lack of honesty and truthfulness in fashion postings erodes the credibility of the blogger and the trust of the readership.

Nevertheless, overall, the findings indicate a considerable degree of contradiction between the often-idealistic comments made by the majority of fashion bloggers about their duty to their readers and the frequently mercenary ambitions revealed by their actual practice.

The increased commercialisation of blogs raises several concerns about the function and locus of control within the fashion blogosphere. For many of the study participants, securing sponsorship deals had become more important than maintaining the detached authenticity of their output. Participant comments confirm that many bloggers feel under pressure to censor their personal opinions in order to maintain the positive atmosphere of their postings. They believed that doing so is important and necessary to make their blog more attractive to brand sponsors as well as to their mainstream audience. This implies a change in the nature and function of many fashion blogs: providing unbiased, helpfully critical information to their readers has become secondary to simply promoting the product. The willingness and in many cases the desire of many fashion bloggers to be engaged in sponsorship has several ethical implications. Increased interaction with commercial interests inevitably implies a dilution of blogger independence, with some degree of control over editorial choice and critical comment ceded to the sponsor. Resources from sponsors are likely to be increasingly directed towards individuals seen as meeting industry advertising criteria i.e. bloggers who can demonstrate that they are dependable, non-controversial and 'safe'. Blogs may therefore increasingly resemble traditional legacy forms of fashion advertising such as print magazines and fashion. The independent critical discursive voice of the early fashion blogger will have been muted.

The unwillingness of many bloggers in this particular study to be negative about products also represents a considerable shift in blogging practice and may be a reflection of the way in which sponsorship opportunities have distorted the values

and the voice of some current fashion bloggers. This finding contrasts with the expectation in early fashion-blog literature that focused on blogger willingness to offer personal judgements and reflections on fashion products, and on a general blogger commitment to expressing their own candid views. This clearly critical function of original fashion blogs posts was interesting because they were distanced from conventional industry advertising and free to be different and independently controversial. Characterised by discussion and involvement, produced by individuals who were both creators and consumers, earlier fashion blogs looked to be a spontaneous and credible channel of fashion information from a non-compromised source that was outwith direct commercial control. Blogger authenticity was a key factor that contributed to the initial popularity of fashion blogs. However, participant comment overwhelmingly points to an increased desire to please the brand first rather than the reader, despite the frequent claim voiced by many bloggers to the contrary.

5.2.3 Impact on mental health

Another key finding relates to the impact that fashion blogging can have upon the mental health of some of its practitioners.

A significant minority of participants in the Active Younger blogger group revealed that they felt that they had experienced negative personal and emotional pressure as a result of their fashion-blogging hobby. In addition to managing the overall impression made by their blog material upon readers, participants also often experienced considerable internal pressure to manage the ways in which they presented themselves online. Thus, they felt pressure to maintain an online artificial illusory self, 'wearing a mask' and showing a different persona online. One blogger reflected on the considerable effort needed to maintain this illusion: she found this obligation to present a fake life as being difficult and very time consuming and she felt lonely as a result. Another respondent felt immense pressure to continually refresh her photographic presentation by regularly replacing her wardrobe and was driven to adopt artificial and inauthentic practices in order to do so.

Many in this group also referred to their worries about their personal body image induced by a combination of the fear of social comparison and appearance pressure when presenting themselves to their online audience. When posting outfit photographs, they felt under pressure to emulate the almost unattainable appearance of fashion-magazine models. The comparison between their own natural photographs and the professionally airbrushed and manipulated images in magazines caused a considerable degree of insecurity. One particular individual made a specific link between her blogging practice and the development of eating disorders. This blogger believed that she had developed anorexia directly as a result of the personal pressure that she felt to maintain unrealistically high presentation standards in her blogging output. Her case echoes the long-standing issues of mental health and well-being experienced by many fashion industry models.

The adoption of a more professional persona or 'mask' is clearly a response to the competitive commercial environment within which many fashion bloggers now

operate: their appearance and message must satisfy the expectations of sponsors and readers. In addition it can also be argued that it is a protective strategy and part of their defence against the possibility, however unlikely, of abusive trolling or of being 'cancelled', something which clearly concerns many fashion bloggers. As a result, many admitted having to communicate in ways that they found uncomfortable and artificial, promoting their material in forms that they knew were often manipulative, shielding aspects of their real daily life which did not correspond with those of their 'virtual glamour life', and therefore often communicating with their readership in an inauthentic voice.

The intrinsic pressures generated by taking part in fashion blogging was a primary reason why the majority of Inactive bloggers had decided to abandon the activity. They also felt that fashion blogging had increasingly become more arduous and stressful once sponsorship was involved and they were subjected to the many pressures that it entailed, a view echoed by many Active younger participants. The hobby had become more business-like, competitive, and stressful. Several participants referred to the corporatization of what had been an amateur hobby. The original sense of individual pleasure that many gained from fashion blogging had been replaced by the need to conform to standards set by others. For some, blogging had become a relentless slog.

These findings contrast with existing studies which have regularly described the potential therapeutic benefits that blogging can encourage. Several researchers in the general blogosphere have suggested that the cathartic process of publicly documenting one's personal thoughts and feelings is a frequent part of the blogging process that can have a positive impact on emotional health and well-being. However, only one Active Older participant made mention of fashion blogging in terms of positive therapeutic activity, suggesting that this may be a possible line for future investigation.

Many participants also indicated that they had either received or were distinctly fearful of receiving negative personal comments and criticisms online. They were particularly concerned about receiving abusive remarks on newer platforms such as Instagram and Twitter where it is easier for abusers to comment anonymously. This fear of abuse was specifically identified as an inhibiting factor by a number of

participants, who said that they had consciously decided not to promote their blog and therefore not grow their readership. They were disturbed by the abuse that high-profile fashion bloggers such as Zoella has received, and also alarmed when friends who were amateur bloggers like themselves had received hostile comments. As a result, they preferred to keep a lower profile online, choosing to mostly interact with fellow fashion bloggers who they trusted to understand the rules and protocol within their specific sector of the blogosphere. Several comments indicated that abusive remarks were more common on the newer, more publicly accessible photo-based platforms but remained rare within the world of traditional hobbyist blogging. Several participants took the view that, given the general lack of effective monitoring and regulation, this was a sad but inevitable part of the contemporary digital world.

Although study participants frequently made remarks similar to those above, only a very small percentage of respondents had actually received negative comments of the type that they feared. These often hostile remarks almost always tended to be received on their YouTube and Instagram accounts, rather than on their fashion blog. The respondents suspected that these abusive individuals were probably not active bloggers themselves and certainly did not seem to understand traditional blogosphere etiquette. These respondents assumed that abusers simply saw blogging as just another form of fashion advertising and felt free to make negative remarks without fear of consequence. These findings contribute to the sense that there has been a distinct shift within the fashion blogosphere from an essentially supportive, friendly atmosphere to a darker environment.

Overall, these findings suggest that many fashion bloggers have increasingly adopted what might be described as defensive attitudes and behaviours in order to protect themselves from potential online abuse. The fear of receiving abuse online is causing distress to some fashion bloggers and is an additional factor that is contributing to increased self-censorship in their practice. Many bloggers have also admitted to being reluctant to grow their following, fearful that they might attract a higher degree of online exposure with their fashion blog. In addition, some have become increasingly fearful to post on other, newer and more uninhibited social-media channels. Many of the respondents' comments suggest that fashion bloggers may have been encouraged by these trends to retreat into

smaller, more comfortable groups of familiar online acquaintances. Many admitted to taking great care to post nothing too controversial. However, this fear of abuse and its possible impact upon mental well-being may also have driven some fashion bloggers to abandon the activity altogether. Numerous comments suggested a general increase in blogger fearfulness and the feeling that many bloggers now are lonely and wary of engaging openly with others online unless in a tone quite distant from the more open conversation that characterised the earlier social spirit.

The comments of this specific group of 307 respondents are substantially at odds with the general emphasis in the literature upon blogging as largely being a potentially therapeutic means of expression. Their remarks indicate that involvement in blogging can stimulate a much wider range of behaviours, some of which can be detrimental to the participating individual.

5.3 Future research recommendations

Potential areas of future research that might be developed from this study have also been considered.

The current study offers opportunities for further research, which might include investigating each target blogger group in more depth and with a particular focus on the Active Older Bloggers and Inactive Bloggers. These participant groups have had limited coverage within the academic literature but may be of greater future interest as the demography of the blogosphere changes.

Similarly, the six main themes identified are all areas of continuing change and therefore of interest to researchers and practitioners that can be explored further. In addition, there are a number of concerns that emerged from participant comments that merit further investigation. These include the pressures upon bloggers and the implications for personal wellbeing and mental health, and the growth of online abuse targeted towards women in the fashion-blog sector.

Many of the findings offer the opportunity to adopt longitudinal research in order to monitor and check using the same group of bloggers to identify and understand ongoing changes within the fashion blogosphere. It was already intended to return to the participant groups as a source of comment upon on-going and future developments in the blogosphere. All of the primary data referred to in this study was collected and organised in November 2019 i.e. prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 global health pandemic. Therefore, it may be of value to involve the groups in order to investigate the impacts that the pandemic has had upon their blogging activity, on their ambitions for their blog, and to seek to identify, collate and understand any discernible difference in their attitudes and perceptions.

When discussing contrasts between their own blog output and fashion magazines, all participants automatically made reference to *Vogue*, but no reference was made to any other middle or lower-end fashion magazine, a curious outcome that might be examined as part of future research.

A further future goal would be to select aspects of the findings and build upon them in order to develop a potential report that might be of interest to journal publications in the online fashion studies and marketing fields, such as *Fashion Marketing and Management*.

Other aspects of the findings are likely to be of particular interest to industry marketing professionals working in the fashion blogosphere. The study participants themselves made a number of pertinent observations about the ways in which their partnership with brands were currently managed. They suggested a number of feasible strategies which they felt would encourage more effective collaboration and communication between bloggers and sponsors.

5.4 Research limitations

Although justification and rationale for the choice of methodology has been provided above, the selected approach based upon qualitative research involving 307 questionnaire responses and 28 interviews inevitably entails some degree of limitation. When conducting qualitative research, it is generally accepted that the researcher can never be entirely certain that they have established a definite and all-encompassing conclusion. Nevertheless, this study was based upon a relatively large number of respondents who generated a considerable abundance of rich data from the online questionnaire, which was in turn supported and confirmed by the comments that emerged from the in-depth interviews. This multi-method approach was adopted to try to ensure the relevance and validity of the gathered data.

At an early planning stage in the research process, using a content-analysis approach was considered as it might have been of interest to identify a series of blog posts and examine their content both before and after the inclusion of sponsored content. However, this idea was discarded as it was not possible to identify discernible factors in the selected blog material that was specifically relevant to the main objectives of this study. It would have been possible to have drawn some limited conclusions as regards blog-content inclusion decisions, but this offered very little insight as to their thoughts and opinions on the key issues that the study intended to investigate.

Similarly, the selection of appropriate, viable methods that could be utilised was also limited due to the fact that the fashion bloggers involved were located across the UK and could only be contacted online and via telephone. If the study had been conducted in a major centre of blogging activity, e.g. London, where regular blogger events and conventions take place, there could have been the potential to hold large fashion-blogger focus groups and/or face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, it was clear that many of the research participants appreciated being able to take part in the study through online and telephone channels, as it was essentially anonymous and convenient. Many indicated that it was their preferred method of communication.

Another possible limiting factor stems from the fact that all of the research participants were female. A number of male fashion bloggers were identified and offered the opportunity to participate but in the event no responses were received from these individuals. Future research into the range of themes covered by this study might benefit from a focus on the opinions and attitudes of male bloggers in order to establish possible gender differences. In addition, this research focused upon fashion blogs. It might therefore be useful to use the methodological structure adopted in this study to investigate a wider variety of blog genres which feature sponsorship in areas such as beauty, fitness and online gaming. A study of this kind might contribute to understanding the values of participants in different sectors of the blogosphere, and to better understanding the attitudes of a wider range of bloggers.

5.5 Final conclusion

This study has examined aspects of the fashion blogosphere by focussing upon the experience and attitudes of different types of fashion blogger whose views have received very limited attention in the existing literature to date. As a result, the study contributes a number of new perspectives to our understanding of this sector of the blogosphere and to the attitudes and behaviour of these online practitioners. This is especially the case with the following themes that have emerged from analysing fashion blogger comments: the personal pressures and tensions felt by many fashion bloggers as a consequence of their engagement in commercial partnerships, and the negative impact that this can have in terms of personal stress and mental health; the growing contradictions between the ways in which fashion bloggers regard and represent themselves and the reality of their actual online behaviour in response to issues such as disclosure of sponsored material, self-censorship and reluctance to be critical; fashion blogger response to the requirements of regulatory bodies; the higher priority that many fashion bloggers now place upon commercial opportunities rather than their relationship with readers and maintaining a critical, authentic voice within their output; the decline in social community within the fashion blogosphere.

Blogs continue to be a very influential internet medium that challenges traditional advertising outlets, in large part because of the relatively high level of credibility that they have established among followers/consumers. Many companies have exploited blog marketing potential to promote products and services to their target audiences. Commercialisation of the earlier hobbyist community-based fashion blogosphere was probably inevitable given the expansion of the internet, the rise of e-WOM and consumer preference for peer assurance as trust in traditional fashion media declined. However, the changing nature of fashion blogging has raised several new questions: how has the acceptance of commercial rewards affected the nature of fashion blogging? To what extent do fashion bloggers think about the implications of commercial partnerships? Do fashion bloggers who accept sponsorship offer a critical authentic voice?

The impact of commercial sponsorship on the general blogosphere has attracted considerable interest from academics. Research into the specific fashion-blog

sector has tended to focus on the effectiveness of using fashion blogs as advertising channels. However, relatively little research has examined the attitudes and perceptions of fashion bloggers themselves, particularly with reference to the way in which sponsored content has affected their blog output. This study has sought to address that omission by questioning a range of UK fashion bloggers to explore their attitudes to changes in the sector.

Previous research suggests that the fashion-blog sector initially evolved from personal style diaries of fashion enthusiasts into a more commercialised channel with much greater influence over general consumer purchasing behaviour. Companies recognised the potential of promoting their products using 'realistic', 'relatable' bloggers. The introduction of sponsorship changed the way many bloggers viewed their online activity, opening up the possibility of a new internet-based profession, allowing the most successful bloggers to attract global exposure and significant commercial rewards.

This study has analysed a wealth of comments from respondents who had clearly considered the relevant issues and understood the challenges and dilemmas that sponsorship presents. Many of these developments have a direct impact on the authenticity of the fashion blogger's voice: social motivations have been eroded and often largely replaced by commercialised incentives; a readership of equals and friends has largely been replaced by a readership of customers; prioritising relationships with brands than with readers, increasingly seeing themselves as employee/partners in a commercial role rather than as members of a critical club community; the self-adoption of professional titles such as fashion journalists to reflect their enhanced blog quality; an overwhelming reluctance to post critical remarks about products.

Many bloggers attempt to justify their way of handling these developments in the blogosphere by referring to the self-regulatory strategies that they have adopted. The study findings show the ways in which many respondents try to reconcile those aspects of their own practice which might be seen as infringing acceptable blogging behaviour and which might alienate some of their readership. Many participants commonly referred to the following strategies that allowed them to feel that they were still blogging in a truly authentic fashion: many stressed the

effort and attention that they put in to trying to maintain their own unique blog personality and their credibility in the eyes of their readership; many claimed to self-regulate the number of sponsored items that they feature on their blog, thus allowing them to present themselves as moderate and selective practitioners; many emphasised that they were only willing to accept sponsored branded posts, a format which they claim allows them to retain greater control over the content of their posts and their independence from the companies supplying them with products; many stressed the care that they take in selecting the items that they feature so that these match the established tone of their blog. Those who admitted to relatively serious infringements of the 'blogger code' excused their behaviour on the grounds of inexperience, and/or of being naively overwhelmed by the opportunity to work with well-known brands. Some claimed ignorance of the official guidelines or stated that such regulations were unclear, little-known or poorly enforced. Some also expressed regret at aspects of their previous blogging behaviour.

Overall, most respondents felt that they had achieved a suitable balance between accepting appropriate sponsorship and maintaining effective personal relations with their readers. However, a significant minority simply welcomed the benefits of being involved with sponsored products as well-earned, well-deserved recognition of their hard work in offering a helpful, useful service for their readers. In their view, it was also evidence of the activity being recognised as a serious component of the fashion advertising sector.

From the findings of this study, it is clear that the nature of fashion blogging has inevitably changed. The internet has opened a world of opportunities and what was once seen as an amateur hobby has now developed into a professional career path. Fashion blogging clearly now serves a range of functions to suit different individuals and their specific motivations and goals for the activity. There are still people interested in the hobby aspect and being part of a wider fashion blogging community. However, there is a growing majority of individuals, particularly younger, newer entrants to the blogosphere, who have fully adopted commercial approach by creating a blog to add to their CV, to enhance their employability and to pursue a full-time career through the channel. It could be argued that the professionalism of fashion blogs is inevitable considering the digitalisation of

modern society and the rapid adoption and use of social channels. Most industries and employment have become digital and the ability to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of digital platforms such as blogs, has become necessary and essential in order to work in the contemporary economy.

However, the increased commercial involvement in fashion blogging has changed the nature and motivation of the individuals who take up the activity. Due to the potential for generating lucrative rewards, it is attracting a range of different kinds of people with different motives, many of whom aim to serve a brand as best they can and do not seem to want to jeopardise this commercial relationship in any way. For many of these newer fashion bloggers, offering critical fashion reviews is not a significant part of their function. These individuals were often very aware that they had not been professionally trained to offer objective and critical commentary and reflection, and as a result were often undertaking a role that was beyond their experience. As revealed in the study, a large majority of fashion bloggers no longer post negative critical reviews of sponsored products. Participant comments about this issue were contradictory. Many were aware of the expectation that fashion bloggers should be honest and truthful about products, but their actual practice indicated that most now place a greater emphasis upon their relationship with commercial partners. This behaviour symbolises a changed era of fashion blogging in which the blogger's idea of being professional relates to technical excellence in terms of presentation and the creation of positive atmosphere, rather than honest criticism that may be detrimental. Arguably, earlier fashion bloggers and those who continue to distance themselves from sponsorship can find it easier to be critical as they are discussing fashion with friends, family and likeminded individuals online. However, bloggers who adopt commercial involvements can experience a wider range of pressures which make it more difficult for them to be critical in a detached way.

In this key respect, given the changes in the function and purpose of many fashion blogs and the way in which many participants now view their role within the evolving fashion environment, it is fair to say that many fashion bloggers no longer comment about products in a wholly authentic manner, nor do they see this as a particularly important aspect of their practice. Rather than amateur hobbyists,

most fashion bloggers hope to become successful professional participants in the fashion industry.

In 2005, the researcher Kaye optimistically welcomed blogging as a new form of journalism and described its participants as 'watchdogs that keep big media honest'. After more than 15 years of evolution in the fashion blogosphere, this is not a description that many observers would recognise.

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