

Lockdown Diaries: Developing the art of fashion blogging and communication

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Abstract

Blogging provides a platform of communicating with likeminded netizens of the blogosphere. In the forced constraints of the lockdown period fashion blogs provided an outlet for isolated individuals to display their embodied attributes and personal spaces in the world of fashion. The bloggers although self-directed did not contribute in isolation, they actively participated in the complex world of fashion designing, styling, marketing, recycling or research.

The paper investigates the ways in which a bloggers corporeality, strategies and spaces were used to create a successful fashion blog. The passion of promoting blogs reflected the authors need for self-expression, social contact, recognition, introspection and sharing of information or skills developed. The visual world of fashion was effectively portrayed with use of in-depth research, aesthetic labour, monetary investments, linguistic accuracy and communication skills. These reflected in the much-needed appreciation and validation from fellow netizens ensuring the future of fashion blogging.

Keywords: blog, COVID 19, communication, diaries, fashion, lockdown.

Introduction

The increasing pervasiveness of social media into our daily modes of communication is well felt by all during the COVID 19 pandemic period. The stress of quarantine and the need to break the shackles of isolation was never felt as strongly as in the last two years. The urge to communicate with others was felt by almost everyone. People took to blogging as an opportunity of interacting and conversing with sometimes known and many times unknown faces. Blogs during the pandemic were used extensively by savvy digital media users for documentation of the personal as well as collective struggles of a population unable to interact in traditional communication modes. They are now also called 'lockdown diaries' (Goubin) and fast becoming a source of literature for data gathering during the pandemic's lockdown phase.

In this phase of complete isolation and lack of opportunities to 'Dress-up' a number of netizens took up fashion blogging to share their experiences of wardrobe spring cleaning during lockdown or sharing fashion tips or styles for the home captive reader.

Aesthetic labour demands from fashion blogging resulted in fusion of the corporeality of the author, fashion style and private life in large doses. These were illustrated as embodied attributes of the blogger and shared with the audience. The increased commodification of private life and extensification of workspaces due to stringent lockdowns has now left an increasingly narrow gap between their private and public spaces (Brydges and Sjöholm 119).

The current paper investigates the motivation for fashion blogging during the pandemic and the ways in which a blogger strategized and introduced personal and private objects or spaces in order to make the fashion blog successful.

Blogs and blogging

Blogs are today's revolutionary tools of communication. The first blog was created way back in 1994 by a student Justin Hall to publish his writings, others quickly followed. The first blogs were then called links.net. and were usually a compilation of the series of notes which were called 'Personal pages' or 'Online Diaries'. The term stands true even today when several netizens found release from the day-to-day stresses during the pandemic by noting their personal activities in the wide world of the blogosphere. However, the term 'Weblog' was later coined by Jorn Barger to describe these sites. A simpler term 'Blog' was then coined by Peter Merholz in 1999 (Blood 3).

The reason for bloggings popularity during the lockdown was because it provided a platform for the an individual to connect and communicate with like-minded people in the area of their specialisation. They could showcase their skills, knowledge or talents within the safe, sanitised, security of their homes. This proximity with the audience enabled bloggers to establish a personal brand, achieve recognition and credibility. A successful blog when implemented with the right audience capturing strategies over a period of time can be used to monetize the venture by the blogger in the future (Dianna). Blogs offer a research window into understanding the bloggers 'self-narrative', as they are regular updated negotiation of the "Project of the self". Even though blogs offer chronological, unadulterated, primary information, blogs are comparatively underutilised repositories of data (Hookway 91).

Fashion blogging

In the world of style the trickle-down theory of fashion is largely observed in its most classic form, where trends are a tightly kept secret until the day of the fashion show or release in exclusive designer stores. Fashion influencers play an active role in collecting this information through a range of physical, social and digital channels. They then interpret the latest trends in style, colour, fabrics and accessories and diffuse this information to the masses Fashion blogging has established itself as a medium for mass communication within this world of fashion. In its simplest essence it falls into the 'Two-step flow method of communication' (Weimann 291). The model suggests that mass media content usually reaches 'opinion leaders' first, who based on their skills collect this information, interpret it and then pass it to less active media users in the blogosphere.

Initially bloggers were largely kept out of the global fashion conversation. Now they have forged themselves into voices of authority in a notoriously insular fashion industry. By challenging the status quo, fashion bloggers have reconstituted power and influence in the fashion world simultaneously creating new modes of participation in this dynamic scenario. As a part of the fashion blogosphere, they actively negotiate between stakeholders such as fashion designers, fashion brands, retailers, website and content creators along with the readers (Luvaas 55). This implies that fashion trends and tips are received by most members of the blogospheres through this interpersonal form of communication and not directly through mass media channels as previously used by designers and retail outlets (Weimann 291).

Fashion and the lockdown diaries

In the early days of the lockdown for most individuals blogging started as an opportunity to make diary-style entries of their day to day wardrobe additions or activities, it has been noted to quickly evolve into fashion styling tips or views on fashion styles worn by celebrities.

The author of a blog usually incurred little or no initial cost in the writing and maintenance of the blog. However, later on in the journey towards being a fashion influencer the cost of maintaining appearances and take social media friendly pictures may have had both emotional and financial expenditure in the form of aesthetic labour. Fashion blogging is categorised as aesthetic labour because bodies, emotions and aesthetics all merge into creating one comprehensive whole (Nickson et al. 170).

As a part of aesthetic labour the blog could be conceived as an embodiment of the authors self. Therefore, efforts are put in keeping up appearances which requires investment of emotional energy and emphasis on freelancing labour through social and digital media. This suggests, that the fashion blogger is 'always on' (Entwistle and Wissinger 774).

Therefore, unlike corporate workers a freelance fashion blogger as an aesthetic labourer has no respite and cannot walk away from her portrayed life style (Witz et al. 33).

The key to the success of fashion blogging can also be attributed to the easy interactivity between the fashion blogger and reader through tools such as comments, trackbacks, RSS, bookmarking etc (Luvás 55).

A good example would be by a blogger Amy Cook, who noted in May 2020, that "It wouldn't be spring or indeed lockdown without a good old clear out. I've seen many of you on Instagram proudly sharing your wonderful efforts" (Cook).

Blogs as a tool for data collection and analysis

Although it is difficult to estimate the number of fashion blogs that existed pre and post the Pandemic lockdown, it was clear that blogs in the form of personal lockdown diaries became a rage in the last two years (Goubin). Out of five sectors the two most popular verticals in the blogosphere were fashion and beauty. Similar to fashion blogs that existed prior to the COVID 19 pandemic the fashion blogs originated as the authors expressions of personal style or discussion on the 'outfit of the day' (Brydges and Sjöholm 119). But longitudinal study of these blogs quickly started providing indepth and personal information of the bloggers lifestyle or views. It can be considered as rich primary source of data because the blogger works in his or her own personal or private space and therefore enjoys autonomy in selection of topics. Thus, the information contributed is assumed to be usually frank and largely unbiased but may sometimes become opinionated. The blog not only reflects the views of the blogger but also of the readers through the deep connectivity between articles discussed, links attached and further followed several times with comments from readers.

Standing apart from the blogs of established Fashion Influencers these blogs were adopted by a wide number of people who had not used this medium of communication before. They wished to communicate their design ideas and styles from existing wardrobes or create content based on individual fashion experiences They contributed to blogs along with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram which helped the home locked public create a social media presence

Need for Fashion Blogging

Based on a large amount of research on why bloggers blog seven needs have been identified. They are the need for self-expression, recognition, social contact, introspection, documentation, artistic activity and last but not the least an academic need for knowledge and interest (Michael and Alony 469).

All the above mentioned needs stand true for the fashion blogger especially during the lockdown period.

- **Need for self-expression:** Self-expression is a basic need of all human beings, as what we are speaks for us, even more so during the pandemic when we all were in isolation of our homes. In the space where no fashion shows or trade fairs were initially possible publication of one's thoughts on designs and collections of fashion designers made several bloggers act as 'Oracles of information' (Jeremy and Jacobs 232). This publication of personal thoughts could have been a uplifting experience and source of expression. The interactive nature of the blogosphere and receiving of immediate appreciation or acknowledgement may have actually supported exhibitionistic behaviour within the designer turned author of a blog. Thereby ensuring the blogs successful growth.

A number of fashion bloggers also discussed design faults or problems they faced in garment purchase, consumption or care. The blogs acted like a relief valve where they could express these concerns hoping someone somewhere will nod a virtual head. The dramatization of simple problems with a profusion of adjectives was also observed in some cases.

Blogs also helped individuals to vote for a cause or promote an ideology. Common subjects touched upon were eco-friendly fabrics, sustainability, fast fashion, recycling, organic textiles, avoidance of body shaming etc.

- **Need for recognition:** As described by William and Jacobs the need to publish one's fashion choices as well as achieving responses or comments from a like-minded community leads to a sense of recognition. Some fashion blogger's keenly follow celebrities and their clothing choices and thus become celebrities in their own netizen world. High scores on Webcounters indicating number of visitors to the blog as well as links shared on the writer's page also adds to a sense of recognition. Embellishment of experiences or even creation of fictitious issues in order to attract a bigger audience has also been observed occasionally (Ben-Amos et al 46). The reliability or validity of the fashion blogger used to be highly suspect as it was often thought that they could portray fictitious social status, educational levels, age or even gender. However, it was noted that the need for recognition is a strong driver for blogging hence the author is most likely to expose their true details for being a part of the blogosphere lime light. Most of these can be cross verified by the authors other accounts such as Instagram, Facebook etc (Geyser).
- **Need for social contact:** Motivation to write and later continue fashion blogging also arises due to the need for social contact both within existing relationships as well as new ones. A large volume of comment traffic is expected through existing friends, colleagues in the fashion business and members of the shared blogosphere. Normative commitment and a feeling of obligation to read and reciprocate to 'friends blogs' is part of human nature (Meyer and Allen 61). Especially in the fluid field of fashion, where forecasting and following fashion is greatly influenced by what is perceived from visual promotions of the latest style or design. Prior to the pandemic many

blogospheres also had group events or face- to-face meetings during fashion weeks, trade fairs etc, where links were shared thus increasing social contact points and chances of recognition.

In the absence of these organised physical fashion shows and ramp walks, another trend observed in the last couple of years is forging of bonds among bloggers as voices of authority within a tightly knit and largely insular international fashion world. This has made fashion blogs dynamic centres for the reconstitution of power and influence within the fashion industry (Luvaas 55).

- **Need for introspection:** Most fashion bloggers start their blogging adventure with a spirit to know themselves and explore their views on fashion and style. The literature is usually peppered with ‘I think’ and ‘I feel’. As the blog matures these are replaced with more structured opinions and market analysis of fashion trends. Challenges faced in selection of appropriate garments for occasions, body types as well as budget are touched upon.
- **Need for information and skill development:** Blogs are generally considered as ‘underground’ cultures of information sharing. The objectiveness and truthfulness of blogs is usually considered highly suspect. However within the fashion blogosphere more and more blogs are being created by experts to provide authentic news and updates in the field of fashion (Clyde 43).
- **Need for artistic outlet:** Articulating ones ideas on fashion trends, personal style and designer wear to suit various public figures, body types or events are a common motivational factor for most bloggers. Blogs give an opportunity for the author to bring out creative nuances of their personality which are otherwise not dominantly portrayed in their day to day garments, fashion accessories or designer lifestyle. Today not all blogs are ‘writing blogs’. Other common and popular forms of blogging used in the fashion arena are ‘photoblogs’ and ‘vlogs’. They can be a pictorial articulation of one’s sense of style or lifestyle. Giving an even more visual outlet to a writers artistic ability.

Fashion content writing used in the lockdown diaries

In the process of sharing fashion content online the author creates a verbal expression to a highly visual content. To benefit the audience and keep the dedicated reader interested the bloggers plan strategies and hone the following skills:

- **Researching:** The early phase of lockdown was marked with a drought of new fashion designs. The absence of new styles released by designers and retail outlets through standalone fashion shows or fashion weeks made authors fall back on collecting data from other trustworthy sources. Therefore, content of blogs changed from trends and forecasts to fashion styling tips and recycling of garments pre-existing in wardrobes. This could also be in response to the grim reality that the economy was hit and a number of readers may have lost jobs or faced other financial setbacks. Use of fashion terminologies made several blog posts more in-depth and authoritative. On the other hand, technical textile or fashion terminology and names of garments were replaced with long winding sentences, to explain fashion concepts to the layman.

Use of Pinterest to create personal style mood boards was also observed in experienced bloggers. This is considered an important feature as authors were

researching and collecting pins as a visual source of inspiration and ready reference for content writing.

- **Communication:** The common trials and tribulations faced by the masses in isolation and an opportunity to interact on common topics was the reason for most fashion blogs becoming popular. While initially the blogs were treated as ‘News space’, over time each blogger developed a distinct style of communication. Along with the creators fashion style their personal character was also reflected in the entries made and method of responding to comments and feedbacks. Contrary to popular belief it has been observed that blogs with personal traits and idiosyncrasies helped add to the popularity of blogs instead of alienating the reader (Jeremy and Jacobs 232). Similarly in case of the virtual, infinite space of the lockdown diaries of fashion bloggers a theatre of interpersonal communication was found to have developed. Lines between personal and private spaces became hazy or even started disappearing. This exhibitionistic behaviour was usually supported by encouraging comments from readers. In some cases sought after by the readers in the form of increased subscription. Pictures of personal attempts at creating stylised posts or content was often appreciated as individualism thereby positively reinforcing the opinions of the bloggers. (Jacobs 2)
- **Linguistic Accuracy:** Many blogs written by new authors were observed to have simple grammatical errors and stray verbiage that could distract from the context of the blog. However, the passion and spirit of the blogger sharing his or her dressing experience seemed enough to enthrall the reader. Most considered it important to be authentic as admitted by a fashion blogger Ali Levine, host of ‘*Celebrity Styling with Ali Levine*’. Whether authors used online digital tools for spell check or grammar correction was difficult to ascertain. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) skills were found to improve with progression of time and number of posts. The reason could be the bloggers need to achieve a wider viewership. Optimizing the content to maximize the blogs appearance on search engine result pages (SERP’s) was found to be the quickest way. Words such as fashion, wardrobe, style and names of red carpet celebrities were liberally sprinkled in the content (Pedroni 179).
- **Investment:** Getting started on a blog was considered quite easy by statements made by the bloggers, however investing in good photography equipment was also advised. Considering that blogs are considered as aesthetic labour, keeping up with appearances and sharing clothing goals with the reader required good pictures in equally good clothes, which may not always be pocket friendly. Use of custom designed websites or purchasing their domain name was also considered after popularity of the blog was assured by sufficient likes or readership (Nickson et al. 170)
- **Business Acumen:** A popular fashion blog develops not only with a good sense of style but also needs to be nurtured like any full-time job or business. Broadening the reader base was achieved by finding like-minded designers or manufacturers and pitching mutually beneficial ideas to them and vice-versa. Within two years several blogs which started with a simple goal of sharing, received a number of offers for collaborations and advertising opportunities. However, an even larger number did not become ‘Street Style Stars’ or ‘Instagram famous’ and may have stopped blogging as the lockdown restrictions reduced. Thus, those who took to blogging as a profession needed to invest mind and money with clear business strategies such as negotiations

with stakeholders like designers, fashion outlets and fashion product manufacturers. However the lockdown diaries were not always about business as fashion blogger Pallavi Singh of Moda Ninja promoted making coronavirus memes for fashion readers as she strongly felt that humour helps overcome the tough times her readers were facing.

Conclusion

The lockdown diaries of fashion bloggers have been a fascinating source of data collection. The need for fashion blogging resounded throughout the globe as a method of overcoming the stress of isolation. The content in the blogs and strategies adopted by fashion bloggers to make it interesting were vast and varied. This increasing popularity of fashion blogging and its ability to attract such a vast and fluid population has been observed by a number of fashion designers, retail outlets and celebrities. Further attempts have been made to incorporate these blogosphere dialogues as marketing strategies between an invisible manufacturer and elusive customer. Thus, leading some of them to move on to becoming fruitful financial ventures.

To the individual fashion blogger publication of personal thoughts has been a cathartic experience. It has allowed for exploration of the self and penning of day to day experiences, trials and tribulations faced by individuals in dressing and styling of self. Aesthetic labour has been used extensively as very few resources and avenues were available for acquiring material for the blogs. Thus focusing on the movement of blogs away from the handful of a few fashion influencers to the common man. This could be the essence of the popularity of the fashion blogging phenomena during the lockdown imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic.

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