

# The Construction of an Online Identity

*A Case Study of Fashion Blog 'The Blonde Salad' and Founder Chiara Ferragni's*

*Activities on Instagram*

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## Abstract

Blogging and using social network sites (SNS) have been one of the rising activities of mainstream communication this past decade. Although many such blogs and SNS have been studied by scholars already, the relations between these two and the corresponding developments in the field demands an updated investigation. Our ideal way of communicating is changing rapidly, and bloggers who use the social network site Instagram are a good example of how this affects our online behaviour. Microblogging website Instagram has rapidly become part of mainstream media over the last couple of years since its founding in October 2010. The success of the site is evident, given the 400 million monthly active users who on average share 80 million photographs a day. As a result of their rising popularity, many blogs have spread their content on social networking sites, and especially on Instagram.

The type of blog that does so at great length and is studied here is the fashion blog. ‘The Blonde Salad’, a very successful fashion blog by Italian Chiara Ferragni is taken as an example as it successfully integrates Instagram in its daily communication with its followers. ‘The Blonde Salad’ has been around since 2009 and has developed into a company with several employees. But since the arrival of Instagram, Chiara Ferragni seems to have become more and more influential as an individual, outshining the blog’s amount of followers of 191.000 with 6.000.000. The aim of this article is, therefore, to answer the research question: *How do fashion bloggers create and maintain an online identity on Instagram regarding the theory of the ‘social actor analysis’ (van Leeuwen 1996, Machin and van Leeuwen 2007)?* The Literature Review provides for a broad investigation of ‘self-representation’, ‘the Instagram hipster culture’, ‘the fashion blogger identity’ and ‘Chiara Ferragni and ‘The Blonde Salad’. The Method and Results and Discussion sections elaborate on the case study and provide an interpretation of the visual analysis of the Instagram accounts of ‘The Blonde Salad’ and Chiara Ferragni

**Keywords:** online identity, Instagram, self-presentation, fashion blogger, authenticity

## Introduction

September is the most crucial month of the year in the fashion industry. From all around the world, people related to this industry come together in the fashion capitals of the world: New York, London, Milan and Paris. It is in this successive order that the Fashion Weeks take place twice every year; the Autumn/Winter collections of that year are shown in July and the Spring/Summer collections of the upcoming year are presented in September. Fashion Weeks are the critical discourse moments of the year in which our identity driven economy is saturated with Instagram posts of fashionable individuals. What better way than showing what the fashion crowd is wearing on Instagram, the most visual social medium of its time. But the fashion scene is changing and social media platforms such as Instagram play an active role in supporting new developments in our identity driven online society.

Fashion journalist for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* Bregje Lampe summarized the Fashion Weeks of September 2015 and pointed directly towards Instagram as the instigator of the latest developments (Lampe 2015). One example are the fashion bloggers, who are now often invited to fashion shows instead of traditional fashion journalists. Brands tend to use the online presence of these bloggers as a marketing tool and hope to gain popularity by inviting them. Indeed, Instagram is the platform on which the online image of the brands is projected most prominently these days. Moreover, during the Fashion Weeks of September 2015, few brands still primarily focused on the clothes, while most shows seemed to target for a décor that would do good on Instagram.

When reading articles such as Lampe's, the question arises how these fashion bloggers are satisfying the fashion industry while at the same time showcasing their identity on their Instagram accounts. To understand the fashion bloggers' way of using Instagram, this thesis provides a visual qualitative analysis of Instagram posts of @theblondesalad and @chiaraferragni during the Fashion Weeks in September 2015. The investigation will reveal how Ferragni uses her personal Instagram account @chiaraferragni and her professional account @theblondesalad to create and maintain her online identity. The study is based on the 'social actor analysis' (van Leeuwen 1996, Machin and van Leeuwen 2007), which

provides a tool for an in-depth analysis of identity performance. The analysis will show whether appropriate behaviour for fashion bloggers can be identified and how an individual influences a blog.

Today, fashion is not only dictated in magazines but social media are also very influential. For this purpose, Instagram is not only used at present but will probably be part of fashion's future. Social Network Sites like Facebook and Twitter have been investigated regarding self-presentation and online identity before (Bouvier 2012, Uski and Lampinen 2014), but no such research has been conducted for the microblogging platform Instagram just yet. The past couple of years, (micro) blogging has become an increasingly popular way of gaining popularity as an individual. Especially fashion blogging has grown considerably (Marwick 2013). This study, therefore, combines previously executed studies of identity performance and blogging and the qualitative analysis of fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni's two Instagram accounts. And hopefully, this will lead to an understanding of the importance of building an online identity in present-day fashion blogging.

## Literature Review

This thesis investigates the construction of the fashion blogger identity on Instagram. When this study commenced in 2015, the social networking site had 300 million active users per month, who shared 70 million photographs a day. Only a few month later, no less than 400+ million users are registered, who on average share 80 million photographs daily. The platform has thus rapidly become a very successful Social Network Site, with users all over the world. The content on Instagram is user-generated and depends heavily on online trends. The service is both a photo-editing as well as a photo-sharing community and may be described as a social media platform for micro-blogging. Photography as such has always been subject to manipulation and alterations; events were staged, moments and subject were selected and after a picture was taken it was subject to framing, cropping, soft focusing, retouching and photo montage (Pauwels 2013). Many of these manipulative actions are used in creating an Instagram post as well. The difference lies in that these moments are not as

exclusively selected as before, but rather show ordinary moments in life, like for instance drinking coffee or eating a salad. While photographs have always been able to show perspective and identity, we now use them more than ever before to display ourselves (Marwick 2015, Winston 2013).

## Self-Representation

The main activity of users of Instagram is indeed posting pictures, but there is much more to it. People predominantly show rather than tell on Social Networking Sites. One of the reasons why Instagram has become so popular is indeed the fact that image prominence provides for the users' preference of showing their lifestyle rather than explaining its characteristics (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin 2008), thus reinforcing norms and habits that are only known to insiders. These users communicate by presenting themselves in a particular way to appeal to specific target communities or types of users. Group and consumer identities are thus stressed over personally narrated ones. But before one reaches out to these public spheres, one commonly starts with following their inner circle. This behaviour is considered to be normal, as social networking sites are, in the first place, used as a tool to maintain established connections (Bouvier 2012). The preferred practice on the platform is replicating others' content and (Burke et al. 2009) using similar popular poses and items in the pictures with accompanying trending hashtags. The communication, which occurs because of the correct use of these hashtags and content replicas, comes in the form of likes and comments. The ability to use and search for hashtags is part of the Instagram user routine and the findability of posts is positively influenced by using the most trending and relevant hashtags. As a result, the higher the amount of people that see a photograph, the more feasible it becomes that the post will receive likes or comments. The popularity of a certain subject is, therefore, easily measured by how often a hashtag is used by other users. The hashtags #fashion and #style are both within the top-30 of most frequently used hashtags on Instagram at the moment (Hashtagig 2015). Searching for #fashion gives 250,434,089 hits and #style will show you no fewer than 163,664,949 pictures. Fashion bloggers have experienced the medium as a

successful addition to their spread of popularity. Some of them have even established their fame solely through posting pictures on Instagram in the first place and do not keep a regular blog on a website. Having a popular Instagram account is established through various social and cultural notions such as authenticity, identity and the rise of the lifestyle consumer society. Still, the process of popularizing the online self is difficult to grasp as it is not only unnatural compared to face-to-face communication (Warburton 2013) but also a relatively new way to communicate.

A true self does not exist, it is seen as subjective and ambiguous (Suler 2002), and the same goes for an online true self. As scholars have suggested, profile work is strategic self-representation (Uski and Lampinen 2014) which is influenced by both technological abilities and social norms. One reason for people to have an online tool to communicate their identities is the inspiration they find to adjust to a certain lifestyle. Outward appearances of their identity are built with coherent materialistic elements, their physical appearance and experiences (Uski and Lampinen 2014). Although these pictures can show a polished version of one's life, it is not recommended to exaggerate. Social norms require individuals to act natural in their sharing behaviour (Uski and Lampinen 2014). At times, people who share obviously unrealistic images are punished for doing so. Fake behaviour accounts for the fact that authenticity of the individual is at stake. It needs to be prevented that you are being qualified as a 'fake', a title that is that is gained by either trying to be authentic too hard or by not understanding the social conventions of the particular category. This last reason is often linked to newcomer behaviour. These people are taught how to maintain their own identity through observing others and mobilise their own identity work without replacing these authoritative users. Ultimately, a new niche (Blommaert and Varis 2015) is formed with every new active user on the platform. The popularity of an online account may be explained through the small identities of individuals which are formed through carefully dosed details of behaviour (Blommaert and Varis 2015). These revolve in light groups that are not linked by the vast amount of backgrounds, shared space and cultural assumptions (Blommaert and Varis 2015) and are thus not only physically but also culturally accessible for other users

worldwide.

Another element which should be taken into account when investigating successful members of a certain group, is the amount of identifiable features. Due to our increased use of social media, and Instagram in particular, 'enoughness' is becoming more and more important as a critical tool for identity work (Blommaert and Varis 2015). The benchmark for being admitted into an identity category (as a 'real' or 'authentic' member) is having enough of the particular features specified for them (Blommaert and Varis 2015). However, this element is rather difficult to investigate as 'enough' is a subjective notion and can only be described as enough to produce a recognisable identity as an authentic someone (Blommaert and Varis 2015). Authenticity may be easier to identify, and related to fashion blogging it means the following: 1.) a palpable sense of truthful self-expression, 2.) a connection with and responsiveness to the audience, 3.) an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands (Marwick 2015).

### The Instagram Hipster Subculture

One community of frequent Instagram users that have been studied for their online identity performance is the hipster subculture. Actually, hipsters are very similar in their online behaviour as compared to fashion bloggers, and one might not even be successful in pointing out their exact differences. In general, hipsters also show their identity through clothing and lifestyle, and as with fashion bloggers these people also focus on authenticity (Maly and Varis 2015). Both groups have in common that the individuals try to be authentic which paradoxically forms the basis of a very collective style (Maly and Varis 2015). As with fashion bloggers, hipsters have such typical ways of expressing themselves that they are not only easy to replicate, but also easy to ridicule.

One Instagram account which attempts to visualize and rebuild the typical identity of a female hipster is @socalitybarbie, which uses Mattel's well-known Barbie doll to parody the hipster style. The given description of Socality Barbie's Instagram tells us that she stands for 'authentic living', a satirizing element of its creator, who claims that the authentic Instagram



users are actually a very homogenous group. What is most evident in all her posted pictures is the importance of details and showing particular objects that are associated with the subculture. This account thus shows us that the lifestyles of groups of people such as hipsters and fashion bloggers may indeed be defined by what their Instagram posts show.



Figure 1: one of @socalitybarbie's posts explicitly stating that she and her fellow hipsters are very successful Instagrammers, which is apparently an asset that should be admired.

## The Fashion Blogger Identity

The first step to understanding what a fashion blogger defines, and how one forms their online identity, is looking at the definitions of both concepts. The notion 'identity' is defined with difficulty, as the word is used in different niches (Blommaert and Varis 2015), or so-called social spheres. In general, people will point out various objects when asked what characterizes their identity (Blommaert and Varis 2015), which makes it even harder to point out what the characteristics of a group's identity such as fashion bloggers are. The starting point to comprehend the fashion blogger identity are the definitions provided by the *Urban Dictionary*, an online dictionary which consists of entries written by readers of the platform. As this study is about how audiences perceive authenticity and online identities of fashion bloggers, a dictionary composed by active online participants is a natural starting point. This is a direct quote, hence the spelling mistakes:

"1. Fashion bloggers are a kind of species of fashionistas that dedicate their lives to their fashion blog, a place where they post pictures of the latest runway trends that no one can ever afford (including themselves) or pictures of themselves in slutty poses

wearing things they considered fashionable, such as a fur coat with neon green booty shorts and high heels. Fashion bloggers come in different personas, the most common cases include the stupid 14 year old rich girl, and the 25 year old single girl who can't afford shit. Though most fashion bloggers are female, the male form has not been unheard of, though in most cases the specimen is gay.

*This fashion blogger is so fabulous! I was reading her blog and apparently hot pink shoes are in now... I wonder If I should shave my head and weight 100 lb like the model in the picture?'*

2. A person who steadily collaborates photos of people who are thinner and cooler than them, hanging out with people cooler than their friends, in places cooler than they've ever been. This person doesn't really commit themselves to the trends that they copy out of russh and oyster mags, but lets their 'blog do the talking' about their unique style.

They then intersperse the photos that they have taken of their sisters/friends/from google with commentary that is largely irrelevant or selfrighteous, and not a lot more than what everyone else has been saying. Seem to think other people give a shit.

*\*Watching a girl walk down the street with a studded leather jacket and fake raybans\* -'Ooh, bang on trend' (sarcastically)''*

As these definitions show, the overall attitude towards fashion bloggers is rather cynical and the term is often used derogatively, but the definitions contain crucial useful information to categorize fashion bloggers. Many people want to identify with the term fashion blogger, but only few are taken seriously by their audiences, thereby excluding the above-mentioned '14 year old rich girl' and 'the 25 year old single girl who can't afford shit'. Being able to afford items is a crucial element for being accepted as a true fashion blogger. This implies that successful fashion bloggers are successful because they have the means to buy the newest items but will also benefit from collaborations with brands. The second definition also tells us what kind of activities typical fashion bloggers undertake, which, according to this source mainly revolves around copying looks from magazines. Contradictory to that statement, fashion bloggers do have a 'unique style' according to that same definition.

But when trying to be part of a group like this, one has to be aware that one does not become a 'fashion victim', a term that is used for people who try to look accordingly but overdo it and end up looking over the top by being 'perfectly manicured, groomed and waxed and buffed' (UrbanDictionary 2015). This negative label is avoided by 'dosing', or showing various reoccurring recognizable items to a certain level. Being successful in this occurs when

others recognize what was intended (Blommaert and Varis 2015). Essentially, fashion victims are thought to lack real taste and a personal style, underlined by them wearing every trend. Therefore, the degree of showing can be minimal but must be 'enough', while refraining from occurring too often.

So according to the definitions, most fashion bloggers are pretending to be someone they cannot afford to be, but the identity of the group is still vague. Next to that, it must be taken into account that these entries originate from 2009 and 2010, which may have been too early in time to grasp the influence successful fashion bloggers may actually have. Scholars have indeed pointed out that these definitions do not cover the successes of professional fashion bloggers anymore (Pham 2011, Marwick 2015) and studies have shown how complex it is to become a successful fashion blogger. Next to that, the forming of an online identity has been investigated increasingly. Terms such as 'authenticity' and conceptualizing the 'realness' (Marwick 2015) of an online self, have become prominent factors in this as well. Still, the relationship between being a successful fashion blogger and the forming of an online identity has not been investigated.

Fashion bloggers who are active on Instagram have to strategically create and maintain an online identity. As Refinery29, the fastest growing independent fashion and style website in the United States<sup>1</sup>, mentioned in May 2015 already: '[m]ore than traditional fashion bloggers, popular Instagrammers have built their followings around their individual identities'. A 'distinct aesthetic' which makes these bloggers authentic, is essential for such an individual identity as it attracts a certain audience. Essential for creating such an identity is so-called self-branding, a self-presentation strategy that requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others (Marwick 2015, Hearn 2008, Lair, Sullivan and Cheney 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.corporate.r29.com/#/about-us>

## Chiara Ferragni and 'The Blonde Salad'

Successful fashion bloggers like Chiara Ferragni are active users of 'identity performance', or transforming continuously by understanding and translating changing cultural codes and social norms (Warburton 2013). Social norms are evident in our daily lives but with the soaring number of Instagram members, the set of social norms for online use are changing. Individuals and groups are interdependent in their use of social norms; they both influence each other's behaviour (Postmes et al. 2000). By adopting these norms appropriately, Chiara has become an active and successful member of Instagram.

To fully grasp the identity performance of a fashion blogger, one has to understand the meaning of identity for a fashion blogger herself. Ferragni makes her own choices and has always had a signature style which has formed her identity as a fashion blogger (Keinan et al. 2015). She describes her way of dressing as "effortlessly chic" (Keinan et al. 2015), which she presents through her blog entries and her Instagram posts. As Chiara explains: "I used to mix and match Chanel bags with Zara or H&M clothes. My followers always liked this because they could see how cool a cheap sweater can look when you wear it well. It was something they could really relate to" (Keinan et al. 2015). As she suggests, it is very important for a follower to be able to relate to her personal style which shows her as a wearer of both high-end and high street labels. By showing her audience typical output, she gave her followers tools to recognize her personal style and thus creates a relationship with them. As Ferragni corroborates: "Instagram became the most used instrument in the fashion industry almost overnight" (Keinan et al. 2015) and as a result she could not express herself on the blog anymore with pictures of her daily life. Indeed, when she used Instagram for these kind of snapshots, "everyone got used to seeing food pictures, 'what I just bought' pictures, and 'should I buy this' pictures" (Keinan et al. 2015). Ferragni thus became globally known for her personal style and typical lifestyle content.

By sticking to these two elements, Ferragni gained many followers and became more and more successful. Alice Marwick has called this phenomenon 'Instafame', or the act of having a relatively great number of followers which motivates users (Marwick 2015). Micro-

celebrity may be defined as a mind-set and a collection of self-presentation on social media, in which users strategically formulate a profile, reach out to followers, and reveal personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status (Senft 2008). This product of our attention economy is based on a marketing perspective that assigns value to attract attention. The techniques used for attracting people were first employed by consumer brands (Marwick 2013) but are now also available to individual users as part of their visual self-presentation strategy (Marwick 2015).

## Method

This investigation draws on textual and visual analysis of two Instagram accounts during the four Fashion Weeks of September 2015. This is period in which fashion industry insiders are very active on social media platforms. Fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni has been equally as active, both on her personal Instagram account @chiaraferragni and on her professional account @theblondesalad. This case study is an attempt to investigate and define a reason for the difference in popularity of both accounts and how this is related to conceptualizing an online identity.

The database that was built consists of two parts: part I shows all Instagram posts from @theblondesalad and holds 167 images with their accompanying lines of descriptive text. Part II shows all Instagram posts from @chiaraferragni and holds 216 images. This shows a significant difference in the number of posts, which may foreshadow the emphasis on the individual over the success of a blog. All 383 images are part of the database but for the purpose of this investigation, only the still images were analysed which were the greater part of the database, thereby leaving out all videos. The analyses of all pictures were written down (see appendix I and II) and the entries consisted of the posts' accompanying descriptive text, plus whether the location of the picture was given.

	Part I (@theblondesalad)	Part II (@chiaraferragni)
Total # of posts	167	216
Still images	165	187

Figure 2: an overview of the Instagram content of both @theblondesalad and @chiaraferragni.

By taking a first look at the database, the conclusion was that the accounts mainly show 1.) where Ferragni goes, 2.) with whom she interacts and 3.) what she wears. But Ferragni and her team also have to take into account how they balance out these subjects. As mentioned before, authenticity and thus credibility in fashion blogging means the following: 1.) a palpable sense of truthful self-expression, 2.) a connection with and responsiveness to the audience, 3.) an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands (Marwick 2015). Still, measuring authenticity is impossible as being authentic is always relative and context-dependent as it is a social construct (Grazian 2003, Marwick 2015).

According to the *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, analysing a picture is not necessarily based only on what is visible within the image (Jewitt and van Leeuwen 2001). With Instagram, the image is not the only source of information as various other elements are of importance as well. For example, the use of descriptive texts, a location, hashtags and image manipulations such as filters influences the images greatly. These elements all relate to the context of a post. Although all the Instagram posts show almost intuitive aesthetic data, a qualitative investigation is needed to understand what is shown precisely in the images and what this tells us about identity performance.

As a way of interpreting the online identity, the visual output of the individual was categorised using the ‘social actor analysis’ (van Leeuwen 1996, Marwick and van Leeuwen 2007). This theory provides for a set of concepts that can help answer the question, ‘Who are you?’ (Marwick and van Leeuwen 2007). The database was analysed with this question in mind, and every picture was categorised by being either part of the ‘functionalisation’-category or ‘identification’-category. When a picture was part of the ‘identification’-category, it was then placed in either one of the three subcategories: ‘classification’, ‘relational identification’, or ‘physical identification’.

The first main category is 'functionalisation'. This category defines an identity by a person's actions, for instance Ferragni writing blogs makes her a blogger. Chiara Ferragni thus may be categorised, or 'functions', primarily as a fashion blogger. As the theory explains, language allows us to turn verbs that denote activities into nouns, into fixed categories by adding suffixes, thus making an owner of a blog a blogger (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007). The other main category is 'identification' which defines people's identity not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they, more or less permanently or unavoidably, are (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007). This category is subdivided into 'classification', 'relational identification' and 'physical identification'. 'Classification' may be explained as a category that defines an identity in a certain historically and culturally variable setting, as something may be constructed as 'doing' in one period or culture as a changeable role and may become a way of 'being' as a more fixed identity in another setting. For example, fashion bloggers were not being taken seriously as professionals only a few years ago but at present have great influence in the fashion industry. The second subcategory, 'relational identification', defines identity in term of people's relations to each other (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007), including friends, family and networks. According to Machin and van Leeuwen, this category plays a marginal role in Western society, but Chiara Ferragni's Instagram posts seem to contradict this. Finally, 'physical identification' shows identity through physical characteristics, to which it seems only natural to also add appearance and thus clothing. Along the way, this theory has proven to be helpful but has also shown inconsistencies when applied to this case study.

## Results and Discussion

### Functionalisation

As said before, the function of Chiara Ferragni is mainly being a fashion blogger, but she may also be categorised as an advertiser, depending on your point of view. The objective of this study is to investigate the entire fashion blogger identity and thus all functions will be

investigated. Ferragni functioning as a fashion blogger is a clear case; she owns a blog, 'The Blonde Salad', and she uses professional social networking sites to spread its contents. Only a few years ago, fashion bloggers were not a group that had to be taken seriously. The work of scholars like Pam and Marwick and the newspaper article by Bregje Lampe show a drastic change in attitude towards fashion bloggers. Ferragni started her blog 'The Blonde Salad' with help of former boyfriend and now has a professional team working for her. She is a fashion blogger for a living and her audience and fashion insiders such as designers and editors of fashion magazines consider her to be a serious member of the fashion industry. She is, therefore, an identity performer who understands and translates the changing cultural codes and social norms of fashion.

But Ferragni being an advertiser is somewhat more complex and shows that while being a professional fashion blogger, she has to make content that generates money. Brands choose to approach fashion bloggers for making advertisement deals a lot these days. The content on 'The Blonde Salad' and on both Instagram accounts is marbled with these kind of advertising posts. Sometimes it becomes hard to make a distinction between free publicity and sponsored posts as direct hints such as the hashtag #advertorial is often missing. Fashion bloggers need to be able to express their personal style regardless of sponsors or free branded goods (Marwick 2013). Audiences are very critical on bloggers who blur these types of posts too often and punish them by leaving nasty comments or unfollowing them altogether. Ferragni is aware of these issues and has always been very selective in choosing brands to collaborate with (Keinan et al. 2015). She cannot afford to lose her followers over budgetary reasons. Still, when analysing her Instagram posts, many obvious advertisements were found, of which some did raise the issue of going against Marwick's third rule of being considered 'authentic': 3.) an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands. This element, having an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands (Marwick 2013), is best described at stake in two sponsored posts which show Chiara in almost identical poses, in which she is both holding a bottle of perfume, but from a different brand (see figure 3).





*Figure 3: screenshots taken from @chiaraFerragni's Instagram wall showing almost identical pictures, raising the question of her credibility as an authentic fashion blogger.*

Even very obvious advertisements such as in figure 3, do not cause for Ferragni to be penalised by her audience. This may be explained because of the difference between mainstream fashion journalism content and fashion bloggers output. Because fashion magazines raise the expectation of providing only advertisements they viewed as insincere. In turn, fashion bloggers are not excluded from being 'authentic' by fully engaging in commercial culture (Marwick 2013), as they are mostly successful in balancing out their content. Audiences recognize mainstream media such as fashion magazines as sellers (Marwick 2013), while successful fashion bloggers do not have this stigma. Fashion brands benefit from fashion bloggers' online success, as they can target their sponsored posts at the bloggers' social network while the advertising posts come across as relatively organic (Refinery29 2015). The rise of lifestyle consumer society (Chaney 1996) is very much present in the online SNS environments and especially in those of fashion bloggers on Instagram. In turn, the fashion industry, and in particular fashion bloggers, are important for Instagram's success as CEO Kevin Systrom explains. According to Systrom, "[f]ashion is becoming more seen and accessible through Instagram" (Vogue 2015). The demand for fashion has risen as fashion bloggers show how fashion is worn by real people through street style photography (Rocamora 2012). Ferragni thus has various functions she has to balance out to be a successful fashion blogger; the ideal fashion blogger performance asks for a commercial but social attitude.

## Identification

Due to the success of 'The Blonde Salad', Ferragni herself has had a lifestyle change which highly influenced the blog, but also Ferragni's own online activities. She was first invited to a fashion show in 2012 and only a year later she was travelling to international Fashion Weeks, making these events part of her way of life (Keinan et al. 2015). At first, this development was not giving positive results. As her business partner Pozzoli explains: "Three years ago, when Chiara was taking part in some fashion week, the blog visits would drop by 10-15% because our audience was more interested in Chiara's behaviour than in fashion" (Keinan et al. 2015). They were losing the blog's views because they were posting the same content on Instagram and thus they altered their strategy.

The main goal of the blog 'The Blonde Salad', but also of the Instagram account @theblondesalad is to share an experience with the users (Keinan et al. 2015). Ferragni is now sharing her personal daily activities and looks on her Instagram, and it is likely that by giving the audience what they want, she is getting what she desires the most: followers and likes. The self-branding continues as Ferragni hopes to disconnect her persona from the blog and become in charge of the independent magazine. As Pozzoli underlines: "We are investing more in contents that are not related to Chiara" (Keinan et al. 2015).

Therefore, the question arises to what extent the public sees the true self. This has to do with what we as an audience expect to see on Instagram, we do not want to see her flaws and off days, but rather prefer a polished picture. The audience expects to see a role model. Chiara's persona has become so important that the missing out of a 'face' on @theblondesalad seems to be related to the lack of one crucial element: a personal touch and a relation with the audience, both elements of being an authentic fashion blogger according to Marwick. One's popularity on Instagram is shaped through the amount of followers one has, which is related to your own presence on the medium. While @theblondesalad only follows 31 accounts, @chiaraferragni follows 758 other accounts. Without this element of recognition, a person can never become an online influencer. Geographical presentation in histories of dress is always based on a 'leadership' in fashion (Barthes 1960), and these days

the leaders of the fashion industry are fashion bloggers. The main aim the wearer of clothes has, is to insert oneself into an organized, formal and normative system that is recognized by society (Barthes 1960), like Ferragni's identity is recognized by her online audience. Barthes already understood that dress is, in the fullest sense, a 'social model', a more or less standardized picture of expected collective behaviour; and it is essentially at this level that it has meaning. (Barthes 1960). The distinction between the various elements that form this standardized picture of the fashion blogger identity and how Ferragni is still able to establish an own identity will be discussed hereafter. The following paragraphs will discuss the three subcategories of the main category 'identification': 'classification', 'relational identification' and 'physical identification' (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007).

## Classification

'Classification' is a category which divides people's identities into major categories according to the way a particular society differentiates between classes of people (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007). These categories change over time, allowing an activity to be classified merely as 'doing' at one given time and accepting that activity as part of 'being' in another. As bloggers have altered from 'doing' certain activities to 'being' bloggers who take part in these activities (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007), one could argue that their identity is not only constructed by how they appear, but also increasingly where they go. In other words, a successful fashion blogger who is identified with the fashion blogger identity is expected to be invited to and attend fashion shows and related events.

Bloggers are expected to give their audience inside information of the fashion shows and the activities surrounding these shows such as after parties, openings and exhibitions. Some activities are more easily accessible for those who are not part of the in-crowd and are thus reported on via Instagram by people who want to be associated with the fashion blogger identity as a way of showing the typically expected output. The freely accessible Louis Vuitton Series 3 exhibition that opened during London Fashion Week in September 2015 is one such example of an activity which attracted not only well-respected fashion bloggers but also those

who did not attend the actual fashion shows. ‘The Blonde Salad’ also attended the event but was also invited to many fashion shows both in London, Paris, Milan and New York. The Instagram posts of @theblondesalad display many pictures taken of the actual models showing clothes. Ferragni’s personal account shows less pictures of the shows, but rather focuses on her sitting front-row, an indication of being accepted by the fashion industry and actually ‘being’ a blogger.

It is striking to see that the setting of the fashion shows have become equally as important as the garments shown on the catwalk. Designers know how to influence their audience by creating more extravagant settings which are ‘Instagrammable’ (Lampe 2015). This can also be identified in fashion show pictures of both @theblondesalad and @chiaraFerragni as their fondness of settings are shown by posting several pictures of one show or posing with the décor. The typical output relating to this identity category holds, therefore, anything that has to do with the physical surroundings of the fashion shows during fashion week.



Figure 4: Chiara posing in front of the entrance to the Dior show during Paris fashion week.

## Relational Identification

‘Relational identification’ defines identity in terms of people’s relations to each other often using typical nouns (friend, boyfriend, etc) and possessive pronouns (my, her, etc.) to denote these relationships (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007). Although it is claimed that this type of

identification is not of great importance to Western Societies (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007), Ferragni's Instagram accounts show the contrary. Ferragni aims to establish relationship with both fashion industry insiders and her online audience.

During the Fashion Weeks of September 2015, showing relationships with fashion industry insiders is one of the main goals of using Instagram. At these fashion shows, the same people tend to meet each other, thus creating a relationship with each other, which shows their reputation and their prestige. What seems to be most important, is the recognition of insiders and their approval of what a person does. To maintain these relationships, SNS platforms are the ideal place to create and maintain a network consisting of likeminded people. Ferragni shares many pictures of her relations with others such as family and friends, but more importantly, her moments with well-known figures of the fashion industry. Originally an Italian girl, Ferragni knows how to show of her origins by posting pictures with fellow Italian and editor-at-large of Vogue Japan Anna Dello Russo, using the noun 'Italians' to underline their similar background. The flamboyant Dello Russo is a frequent user of social media, and in particular her Instagram is very popular with 1,1 million followers who cannot seem to get enough of her outspoken street style pictures.

In order to maintain a relationship with her audience, Ferragni uses Instagram by sharing a more intimate or backstage look inside both the fashion shows and her personal life. Ferragni's pictures with her family, on the other hand, give her a more authentic status as she answers the second element of authenticity, being a real person (Marwick 2013). By sharing these kind of pictures, she is increasing the likelihood that she will form a personal (albeit an online) relationship with her followers.

The difference between @theblondesalad and @chiaraferragni becomes increasingly visible when analysing the database with this identity subcategory in mind. Ferragni shares many pictures with her family and her boyfriend on her personal Instagram, while @theblondesalad shows a clear lack of these kind of pictures. Pictures of Ferragni posing with fashion insiders are spread on both accounts. Obviously, @chiaraferragni is a more ideal platform for showing pictures of her personal life, but this contrast has a significant influence

on the popularity of the @theblondesalad account. @chiaraferragni is thus more successful in maintaining the two different relationships: the one with her fashion insiders in order to keep up appearances as a professional fashion blogger, and her relationship with her audience, who will only take her seriously if they can relate to her as a person.



Figure 5: @chiaraferragni post showing her relationship with fashion insider Anne Dello Russo.

## Physical Identification

In the case of 'physical identification', identity is constructed in terms of physical characteristics of specific groups of people which consists of a limited set of nouns (skin colour, hair colour). Chiara Ferragni may thus be identified as a blonde Caucasian woman. But this definition is not sufficient as her appearance is more than these factual elements, and may be broadened by also adding her way of dressing. The fashion cliché 'we are what we wear' still holds today and is displayed all the more during Fashion Weeks. The particular clothes and accessories worn by fashion bloggers show how in style a particular fashion blogger really is. A few popular items of the Fashion Weeks of September 2015 and worn by Ferragni were Gucci loafers, Chloé bags and crop tops. Iconic items such as the Chanel 2.55 bag or a Hermes Birkin bag are re-occurring elements of Fashion Week images, regardless of the season or the year. Ferragni shows that she is a fashion industry insider by posting about

all her new items. The diversity in items often surpasses the persona, resulting in pictures of only the items, without for instance Ferragni actually wearing them (figure 6).



Figure 6: an excessive amount of designer bags, brought only for Paris fashion week.

Ferragni has a tendency towards having a ‘luxury Instagram account’ (Marwick 2013), which functions as a platform for showing her audience what kind of style she has. Another typical asset of her Instagram posts which questions Ferragni’s credibility of having a personal style, is her positive attitude towards various brand. The authenticity of her personal style is threatened by these kind of posts, as it contradicts the photographic “truth” (Marwick 2013). We have already identified how she uses ‘relational identification’ to make her audience feel more related to her, but she also uses one that may be formulated as part of her physical identity. As a more truthful, or relatable counterpart to her luxury lifestyle, Ferragni posts many low-key ‘street style’ photographs, which are typically part for fashion bloggers’ self-branding strategy as audiences prefer seeing a (seemingly) average woman dress fashionably (Marwick 2013) over styled pictures which look like magazine editorials. Such photographs are often taken by a friend or boyfriend (Marwick 2013), but also professional photographers take these pictures of Ferragni as can be seen from the hashtags in the descriptions of various posts. By posting these pictures taken by well-known professional photographers, she underlines her influential position in the fashion industry.

The importance of showing Ferragni's outfits prevails, and some outfits are even shown more than once.



Figure 7: a 'street style' picture shot by a professional photographer.

Sometimes outfit posts are used on both Instagram accounts @chiaraferragni and @teblondesalad, albeit in a slightly different way. As figure 8 and figure 9 show, Ferragni's personal account generated much more engagement. Still, when compared to others posts, the one on @theblondesalad was also very successful for that account. In these pictures Ferragni is wearing a Chloé bag, a popular item of that particular season which shows her knowledge of the fashion blogger identity.



Figure 8: Ferragni wearing on-trend items without looking too over-styled.





Figure 9: a comparable post, but with significantly more likes.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to an understanding of how fashion bloggers use Instagram to create and maintain an online identity. SNS profiles create and communicate idealised selves (Bouvier 2012, Pauwels 2013) but with surroundings being as important as the person, Instagram may be seen as a platform for not only the idealised self, but even an idealised world.

Lifestyle communities like hipsters and fashion bloggers show that people want to identify themselves by being part of a group. To be identified as a member, one has to look accordingly and possess certain items. The fashion blogger identity as such is based mainly on how trending the clothes and topics are which they show on their (micro)blogs. But the paradox is that our identity driven society also asks for independent individuals, stressing the importance of a personal style. Because of this contradiction, hipsters and fashion bloggers are sometimes ridiculed, as with the example of hipster Barbie.

Being accepted as a fashion blogger depends on various elements. The main conclusion that can be drawn is that one must have enough of particular on-trend items, while dosing the amount of posts involving these items (Blommaert and Varis 2015). Sources such as The Urban Dictionary are still using derogative definitions of fashion bloggers, but

blog-turned-companies like Ferragni's 'The Blonde Salad' show that this group has to be taken seriously.

The 'social actor analysis' (van Leeuwen 1996, Machin and van Leeuwen 2007) has been a useful tool to identify fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni's online identity formation both on her professional Instagram account @theblondesalad and her personal account @chiaraferragni. Ferragni has served as a case study to answer the question: *How do fashion bloggers create and maintain an online identity on Instagram regarding the 'social actor analysis' (van Leeuwen 1996, Machin and van Leeuwen 2007)?* By analysing the database using the given categories, it becomes clear that the fashion blogger identity is formed through strategic choices. Fashion bloggers thus form an interpretative community (Machin and van Leeuwen 2007) as they share a linguistic (in this case hashtags) and non-linguistic (in this case visual) communication. By using these particular ways of communication, they construct their own online reality. Although in the past the fashion blogger community was seen as rather irrelevant, the enormous increase of involvement of its audience has resulted in a shift in attitude from professionals in the fashion industry. Ferragni is fully accepted by fashion insiders such as Anna Dello Russo and is often found on a front-row seat, elements which add up to her prestige as a fashion blogger.

Using the 'functionalisation'-category of the 'social actor analysis' (van Leeuwen 1996), this qualitative analysis shows that Ferragni functions as a fashion blogger and may thus be identified as one. But next to that, she is also an advertiser of brands that offer her payments in return for her Instagram posts. As Ferragni's functions are so closely tied to the identity of her blog and herself, this main category ideally would have been one of the subcategories of the category 'identification'. Indeed, the 'social actor analysis' may need an updated version as fashion bloggers are not the only subculture in which the function and identity of an individual has become inextricably connected. The analyses of subcategories 'classification', 'relational identification' and 'physical identification' show that Ferragni's identity is further constructed by 1.) where she goes, 2.) with whom she interacts and 3.) what she wears. Her typical output consists of pictures relating to her luxury lifestyle which are

downplayed by her personal posts. Because of this balance, she obtains the status of an 'authentic' fashion blogger, showing something about her true self, and creating a relationship with her readers by showing her personal style regardless of trends, sponsors, or free branded goods (Marwick 2013).

The fashion blogger community is spread worldwide and the common factor of fashion blur the importance of identity markers. But now that there are so many fashion blogs, the question arises whether fashion blogs are still up-to-date as a medium. Ferragni only gives occasional updates about the newest articles on 'The Blonde Salad' on her personal Instagram and the engagement with the blog is limited. The professional account @theblondesalad shows too much of Ferragni's function rather than her personal identity and thus shows us that the blog itself is dependent on the face of the individual representing it. As fashion bloggers become successful, like Ferragni with her blog 'The Blonde Salad', they will choose their own identity over the objective of storytelling and thus choose to provide for their audience's needs. Ferragni, therefore, has outgrown her blog as an individual. This shows that being authentic, e.a. having 1.) a palpable sense of truthful self-expression, 2.) a connection with and responsiveness to the audience, 3.) an honest engagement with commodity goods and brands (Marwick 2015) is indeed crucial. Still, measuring authenticity is difficult as being authentic is a social construct which is relative and context-dependent (Grazian 2003, Marwick 2015). And thus, the fashion blogger identity as such only exists to a certain extent. Instagram accounts of fashion bloggers such as Chiara Ferragni show that there are rules for becoming a successful fashion blogger. But more important than these rules is the personal relationship a fashion blogger has with his/her audience. Chiara Ferragni from 'The Blonde Salad' shows that by being an authentic fashion blogger she has not only created a successful blog but also that she, as an individual, has exceeded it.

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