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CREDIBILITY HEURISTICS IN FASHION BLOGS:
TESTING THE EFFECTS OF AUTHORITY, BANDWAGON AND COMMUNITY ON
PERSUASION

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ABSTRACT

Twenty years after the original weblog, stories of independent bloggers making a viable income from their influential blogs are not uncommon. Prior studies have hinted at a link between bloggers' influence and their perceived credibility, but what types of associations make some bloggers seem more credible than others? High-authority brand sponsors? The size of their following? Their blogging community as indicated by a blogroll? We presented participants with these cues in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial experiment to understand how cognitive heuristics play into credibility assessments of fashion bloggers. We found that having more followers leads not only to higher perceptions of trustworthiness and a sense that the blogger is part of a well-knit community, but also enhances the positive halo around the brand of the blog's sponsor. The presence of a blogroll resulted in negative perceptions of trustworthiness. Mediation analyses revealed that trustworthiness mediates the relationships between number of followers and purchase intent, as well as blogroll presence and purchase intent. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Literature Review	3
Authority Cues & Advertising	3
Bandwagon Cues & Social Media Statistics	6
Community Cues & the Blogroll	8
Chapter 2 Methodology	12
Participants.....	12
Procedure	13
Operationalization of Independent Variables.....	13
Authority Cue.....	13
Bandwagon Cue	15
Community Cue	15
Measurement of Dependent Variables	16
Manipulation Check	16
Blogger Credibility.....	17
Purchase Intent	18
Brand Halo	18
Sense of Community	18
Covariates.....	19
Data Analysis	19
Chapter 3 Results	20
ANCOVA Hypothesis Testing.....	20
Credibility.....	21
Purchase Intent	21
Brand Halo	22
Sense of Community	22
Mediation Hypothesis Testing	22
Exploratory Mediation Testing	25
Chapter 4 Discussion	28

Limitations & Future Research31
Conclusion32
Appendix Stimulus Examples..... 34
BIBLIOGRAPHY39

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Ad used for high-authority brand sponsor	14
Figure 2. Ad used for low-authority brand sponsor	14
Figure 3. High and low bandwagon cues	15
Figure 4. Community Cue.....	16
Figure 5. Serial Mediation of Authority Cue on Purchase Intent through Halo & Trust.....	23
Figure 6. Simple Mediation of Bandwagon Cues on Purchase Intent through Trust.....	24
Figure 7. Serial Mediation of Community Cue on Purchase Intent through Sense of Community & Trust	25
Figure 8. Serial Mediation of Bandwagon Cue on Purchase Intent through Halo & Trust	26
Figure 9. Serial Mediation of Bandwagon Cue on Purchase Intent through Sense of Community & Trust	27

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Introduction

Weblogs, or blogs, have played a dominant role in the social media landscape over the last twenty years. Personal weblogs and RSS feeds are the predecessors to newer, trendier technologies: microblogs like Twitter intersect with social media, and vlogs, the “video blogs” popularized by YouTube, utilize a modality richer than text alone (Molyneaux, O’Donnell, Gibson, & Singer, 2008). Individuals have even transformed blogging into a potentially lucrative career choice, as opposed to blogging strictly for fun.

Unfortunately for individuals who feel a vocational calling to blog, the blogosphere has a “long tail.” Agarwal, Liu, Tang, and Philip (2012) pointed out that the blogosphere is marked by a power law distribution, meaning that just a small percentage of all blogs command a huge amount of web influence and reach what Ali-Hasan & Adamic (2007) refer to as high-traffic “A-list” status. Agarwal et al. (2012) identified these top bloggers by tracking influence in the blogosphere. Their study indicated that the most active bloggers are not necessarily the most influential ones.

Prior studies have shown that one characteristic of influential bloggers is their credibility. In a focus group study, Kang (2010) showed evidence for a link between blogger credibility and blogger influence. For fashion bloggers in particular, researchers provided a rationale for the link between these two. In a case study of some of the top fashion bloggers, Sedeke and Arora (2013) noted that influential fashion bloggers fill a niche gap in fashion journalism by acting as “trusted and alternative” sources for information. Thinking about ways for bloggers to increase their influence, audience perception of credibility appears to be paramount.

Findings indicating the importance of credibility in blog influence time after time require us to ask, “What makes a blogger seem credible?” Is credibility a function of source authority, or the size of a blogger’s following? Does credibility depend on bloggers’ involvement in the fashion blogging community? Their association with notable others?

Sundar (2008) suggested that credibility judgment is actually a function of user perception that can be formed and altered in just seconds. With the abundance of digital media today, humans often find themselves in situations of information overload. Rather than evaluating credibility in a manner strictly based on logic, which consumes significant cognitive resources, online readers will make low-effort judgments about websites based on mental shortcuts. These judgments are triggered by cues; for example, the letters “PhD” next to an individual’s name could lead to a more favorable judgment about an individual’s credibility (Lee & Sundar, 2013). This mental shortcut activated by a cue is called a cognitive heuristic. On the road to the blogosphere “A-List,” this study endeavors to understand which features on a blog create the perception of a more credible blogger.

The following paper hypothesizes about and investigates three cues that could alter credibility judgments of blogs through impressions of various levels of association with stakeholders. These associations include brand sponsors, blog followers, and other fashion bloggers, highlighting authority, bandwagon and community heuristics, respectively. This paper reviews literature about each concept, leading to specific hypotheses. It is followed by a description of research methods used to test those hypotheses. Finally, we include a section describing our results alongside a discussion of the study’s practical and theoretical implications.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

Literature pertaining to the three major concepts of interest – authority, bandwagon, and community – will be reviewed, in that order. We will focus on identifying cues in media stimuli that trigger cognitive heuristics pertaining to these three concepts and thereby lead to higher perceptions of credibility. These concepts originate from MAIN Model (Sundar, 2008), which proposes theoretical mechanisms for explaining how features of modern media interfaces influence persuasion.

The concept of persuasion discussed in this section is grounded in decades of prior research in the field psychology, originating from famous studies on source credibility by Hovland and colleagues (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and reflecting the newer stream of research focused on social cognition (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986 for an overview). Under this perspective, media stimuli are seen as repositories of psychologically salient cues, which are known to influence individuals in their judgment and decision-making.

Authority Cues & Advertising

One way in which bloggers might indicate their credibility is through a show of authority in their subject area. Specifically, this could be accomplished by featuring an association with high-profile sponsors who are considered authority figures in the content domain. For example,

in the domain of fashion blogs, being sponsored by a well-known fashion house will likely imbue authority upon the blogger.

Lee and Sundar (2013) have already shown that authority cues can impact credibility judgments on the web by examining expert and non-expert sources' effects on credibility. Sundar (2008) explained an "authority heuristic" as the outcome when a user identifies the information source of a website as an expert or authority in the field. According to the principles of the MAIN (modality, agency, interactivity, navigability) Model, using a cue such as a high-authority brand sponsor to trigger an authority heuristic would result in higher levels of perceived blogger credibility (Sundar, 2008).

One example of how modern fashion bloggers are already partnering with brand sponsors is amplified eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth), which involves action on the part of the brand to push bloggers to post about or promote the brand (Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013). This contrasts with organic eWOM, which involves no action on the part of the brand and happens at the sole discretion of the blogger. Sedeke and Arora (2013) noted that cooperation with large brand names gives bloggers the appearance of having "insider 'professional' knowledge." In this way, bloggers can establish themselves as authorities in the fashion world without necessarily working within the industry.

Amplified eWOM has also been shown to affect purchase intent toward products featured on blogs. Lu, Chang, and Chang (2014) conducted an online experiment that exposed participants to a randomly assigned sample blog post with embedded sponsorship. The authors manipulated the type of rewards reaped by the blogger from the sponsorship, product type (search or experience good), and brand awareness. They found that when a reader had high brand awareness for an item, the reader tended to have a more positive attitude toward the

recommendation post. In turn, more positive recommendations led to increased purchase intent. This finding indicates a connection between high-authority brand sponsors and blog readers' intention to purchase recommended products, through credibility. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis for study:

H1: Authority cues will positively influence participants' perceptions of blogger credibility.

But through what mechanism would authority impact credibility in this instance? Consider the reason why sports fans are more likely to wear their team's colors after a winning game (Cialdini, Borden, & Thorne, 1976) or why students like to associate with their popular peers (Dijkstra, Cillessen, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2010). Individuals have the tendency to BIRG (bask in reflected glory), meaning that they flaunt their association with a successful other in hopes that it will make them also appear in a positive light. BIRGing works because of the halo effect. Metzger and Flanagin (2013) explain halo effects online thusly: "When web-based information conforms to [...] expectations [of expertise and attention to detail], users tend to grant it credibility, or at least are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt" (p. 216).

For example, in the case of celebrity product endorsements, a well-liked celebrity exudes a metaphorical halo over a product or service. This causes observers to have a similarly positive attitude toward the product (Fleck, Korchia, & Le Roy, 2012).

In the case of a fashion blog, a high-authority brand sponsor plays a role similar to a celebrity endorsing a product, the product being the blog. Showing association with a high-authority brand sponsor will cast a halo of credibility over the blogger, and therefore:

H2: Brand halo and blogger credibility will mediate the relationship between authority cues and purchase intent.

Bandwagon Cues & Social Media Statistics

Another possible way for bloggers to boost their credibility is showing association with a large audience of readers through a bandwagon cue. The idea of the bandwagon cue is a seminal one in much Communications literature. For example, Sundar and Nass (2001) showed that individuals put an immense amount of trust in the wisdom of the crowd. When readers of online news stories were told the articles they read were selected by other users, the stories were better liked than when the readers were told the same stories were self-selected or chosen by news editors. According to Sundar (2008), the bandwagon heuristic is based on the logic that, if others think something is good, then it must be so.

This pattern of thinking has been replicated in various studies over time. For example, Lee and Sundar (2013) found that on Twitter, professional sources (PhDs), with many followers are considered more credible than professional sources with fewer followers. The number of followers served as an indicator that the user's content had been accessed many different times by different users and is therefore reputable.

Sundar, Oeldorf-Hirsch, and Xu (2008) tested several possible bandwagon cues and their effects on purchase intent in the context of e-commerce on Amazon.com. The authors found that star ratings for products and sales rank both act as bandwagon cues, increasing bandwagon perceptions and thereby purchase intent.

Bandwagon cues in blogs, however, have evolved over time. Initially, blog audiences had the option to subscribe to an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed through an online feed reader or an in-browser feature. Unfortunately, while a blog might have many individuals subscribing to the feed, the number of subscribers was not visible to the blogger or to the public, and is therefore useless in gauging blog popularity.

In 2013, Google shut down their RSS reader due to a decline in use (Grandoni, 2013). Other niche services have cropped up that serve similar functions for individual blog networks, such as Bloglovin. Users can follow blogs through the service, and bloggers may display their follower counts as a sort of badge on their blogs. In addition, bloggers can also install widgets on their blogs that display follower numbers on other social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, or Instagram. Clearly, followers have become a critical component in creating a digital brand.

Not only do follower numbers play a vital role in establishing a brand, but they are also highly sought after. Recent investigations have discovered huge numbers of fake accounts on Twitter created for the purpose of buying and selling followers. By some estimates, 4% of Twitter users are fake (De Micheli & Stroppa, 2013). This indicates that follower numbers are a highly commoditized entity comparable to online currency.

Today, many blogs feature stamps from Google or other social media services like Twitter, indicating follower numbers or other such bandwagon cues associating the blog with a large audience. But because this feature was not popularized until after the inauguration of the age of blogs, this paper aims to understand how the presence of a bandwagon cue might affect credibility in blogging technology.

H3: Bandwagon cues will positively influence blogger credibility.

H4: Credibility will mediate the relationship between bandwagon cues and purchase intent.

Community Cues & the Blogroll

The final method for increasing audience perception of blogger credibility proposed in this study is demonstrating association with a community of blogging peers through the presence of a blogroll, cueing a community heuristic.

In its most basic form, the blogroll is a list of links to other blogs. Typically, these links are located in a blog's sidebar, are updated infrequently (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007), and include blogs either frequented by the blogger or related by virtue of subject matter (Bross, Richly, Kohnen & Meinel, 2012). Ali-Hasan and Adamic (2007) found that it is common practice for a blog reader to recognize his or her favorite blogs by including them in his or her own blogroll or including a link within a post. However, blogrolls are separate from what Ali-Hasan and Adamic (2007) refer to as "citations," which are located within the text of blog posts. Bross et al. (2012) suggests that the sidebar position of blogroll links puts them at a more prominent or prestigious location than citation links.

Research does not use the term "blogroll" as much, and researchers have not yet studied the effects of blogrolls extensively in a quantitative manner. Yet, this feature has persisted and is imitated in other social media vehicles, e.g., YouTube's customizable "related channels" feature; Twitter's listing of people that a user is "following." Therefore, research on the psychological effects of publicizing one's online community of peers or role models can be useful for understanding the psychological appeal of community association in a number of social media platforms.

Indeed, a link can act as so much more than just a portal to another site. Research has shown that a link can act as an endorsement for another site or even as a means to gauge the popularity of websites within a network. DiMuzio and Sundar (2012) questioned whether a

hyperlink could function as an endorsement, and the answer was affirmative: if a linking site is interesting to a reader, there is a transfer effect of that interest to the linked site. This evidence that a hyperlink can have many meanings is corroborated by studies like that of Sedeke and Arora (2013) and many others who actually used linking websites to assess website popularity. These studies demonstrate that being linked is important on the internet. But can linking to others have a similar effect? This paper investigates the effects that inclusion of a blogroll has on blog credibility, with the following hypothesis:

H5: Blogroll presence will increase the credibility of the blog.

To understand why the blogroll might change perceptions of blog credibility, it is important to think about the informal blogger etiquette researchers have uncovered. Triastuti (2014) interviewed Indonesian female bloggers who called reciprocity an “unwritten rule” when discussing blogrolls. Ali-Hasan and Adamic’s (2007) findings were similar: Blogroll links are reciprocated as a courtesy and indicate a mutual awareness or casual relationship between blog authors. Sometimes bloggers even reported meeting a few of the individuals listed on their blogrolls in person.

Li and Chen (2009) defined the blogroll as a means of conferring trust on other bloggers: the blogroller confers trust upon the site being blogrolled. As stated by the authors, who were focused on creating an approach for blog recommendation, “We quantify the relation as a degree of trustworthiness and reliability toward an agent...” (p.6540). A further work by one of the authors, “The Social Hyperlink” (Adamic, 2008, as cited in De Maeyer 2012), compares blogrolls to badges for a blogger. But even more critically, blogrolls have been compared to money: Efimova and De Moor (2005, p.2) explain: “links are not just pointers to additional

information, but also ‘currency of the web.’” They suggest that this indicates a sort of personal recommendation of the linked content.

Each of these studies ties back to one common theme: community. Blogroll creators are participating in a community – reading, evaluating, conferring trust, reciprocating, recommending, and participating. Seeing a blogroll on a blog should signify to readers without them even thinking about it – this person is part of a community. According to Sima & Pugsley (2010, p.303) “blogrolls signif[y] the blogger’s sociability and popularity, enhancing his or her knowledge and forging a sense of belonging and community.”

Ultimately, by associating the blogger with a community of other likeminded bloggers, the presence of a blogroll shows the reader that the blogger is an active player in the blogosphere community around him or her. This creates the impression that the blog owner is well-networked and therefore enhances his or her credibility:

H6: Perceived sense of community and credibility will mediate the relationship between community and purchase intent.

Lee and Sundar posit that the effect of heuristics in instances of credibility judgment often have an additive effect, and that cues are evaluated holistically in the case of Twitter. The same is likely in the case of blogs. If several cues work together to indicate credibility, this will add up and proportionally increase the perceived credibility of the blogger (2013).

Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall (2007) also examined cue-cumulation in their study on news cues examining the effects of three cues: primary source, article upload recency and number of related articles. A 3-way interaction supported the idea of source primacy, meaning that when a news article had a high-credibility source, the other two independent variables did not affect the dependent variable. But in the case of a low-credibility source, the

article was only considered credible based on the state of the other two cues, which is when cue-cumulation came into play.

Similarly, our final point of research is whether an additive or a primacy effect is present between the chosen variables of examination:

RQ: Do variables cumulate, or is there evidence of one variable determining the consideration of the others?

Chapter 2

Methodology

The study took the form of a 2 (high versus low-authority sponsor) x 2 (high versus low number of followers) x 2 (blogroll versus no blogroll) factorial online experiment. This design allowed us to examine all possible main and interaction effects between manipulated variables. When a participant visited the study link, she was instructed to open and examine in its entirety one of eight randomly selected blog websites. The selected blog corresponded with the participant's experimental condition. Upon returning to the survey website, the participant was asked to fill out a questionnaire about her perceptions of the stimulus material.

Participants

The target audience for this study included women between 18 and 30 years old who were able to consent to the research procedures. We selected this particular population because it represents a young-adult subset of what Doran (2014) described as the typical fashion blog audience: between the ages of 15 and 35, seventy percent female. Participants were recruited on both an in-class and outside-class basis from a large northeastern university. In-class participants were offered extra credit for their study participation, while participants recruited outside the classroom from flyers and posts on relevant university social media pages were entered into a drawing for one of five gift cards to Amazon.com.

We screened subjects via the inclusion of two biographical questions at the beginning of the survey website. After obtaining informed consent, participants were directed to indicate their age and gender. If the participant did not indicate that he or she met the aforementioned criteria, the participant was prompted to exit the study. In all, 164 women participated in the experiment. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 1.78$).

Procedure

After providing informed consent and answering the aforementioned biographical questions, participants were asked to visit a linked stimulus website containing the manipulations, assigned randomly. They were instructed to peruse the website in its entirety. For an example of the website stimuli, see the Appendix.

Once the subject finished perusing the stimulus material, she continued on to the questionnaire portion of the study by navigating back to the initial questionnaire link. Finally, the participant was asked to include an email address for the purpose of the prize drawing, or the participant's and professor's names, in the case of extra credit.

Operationalization of Independent Variables

Authority Cue

An authority cue was simulated by displaying a lightbox "sponsor" image when the stimulus blog initially loaded. To access the rest of the website, the participant had to click away from the sponsorship image. The high-authority condition included an ad for Burberry, a brand

known to be a fashion authority, while the low-authority condition included an ad for Gap. The ads were year-neutral, featuring ambiguous product images, and they both pertained to gift shopping, which fit with the early December dates of posts on the main blog. The advertisements were jpeg images taken from real advertising campaigns from both companies in order to establish better ecological validity. See Figures 1 (high-authority brand sponsor) and 2 (low-authority brand sponsor) for a visual of the authority cues.



Figure 1. Ad used for high-authority brand sponsor



Figure 2. Ad used for low-authority brand sponsor

Bandwagon Cue

The bandwagon cue was operationalized by indicating the number of blog “followers” on a badge within the sidebar of the blog. The high-bandwagon cue included 138,046 followers, while the low-bandwagon cue included eight followers. The platform for “following” the blog was left ambiguous. On mouse-over, the badge would flip colors in order to indicate possible interactivity. See Figure 3 for a visual of the high (left) and low (right) bandwagon cues.



Figure 3. High and low bandwagon cues

Community Cue

In order to simulate a community cue, we included a blogroll in the high-community version of the site and left it out for low community. Study participants were informed that all blog links were disabled. We arbitrarily generated names for blogs with a random fashion blog name generator. In all, the blogroll featured 18 blogs. See Figure 4 for a visual of the community cue.

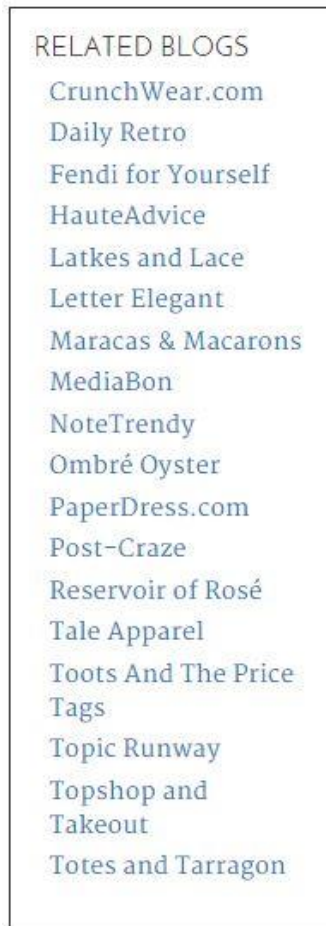


Figure 4. Community Cue

Measurement of Dependent Variables

Manipulation Check

We embedded specific items in the questionnaire to test the effectiveness of each of our three manipulations. We first tested the perceived authority of each of our brands with a Likert-type scale introduced with, “The sponsor of this blog is...” followed by three Likert items ($\alpha = 0.95$) on a seven-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”: “a trusted name in fashion,” “a fashion authority,” and “a prestige brand.”

We also tested to make sure participants remembered the sponsor of the blog, asking participants, “What was the name of the brand that sponsored the blogger?” taking an open-ended response in a text field. This question was presented as the final question in the entire study to avoid possible priming effects by pointing out the sponsor by name early in the study.

Next, we used a three-item ($\alpha = 0.93$), seven-point Likert-type scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” in order to test participant perception of the bandwagon cue: whether they noticed that the blogger had many or few followers. The scale items included, “This blogger has many followers,” “This blogger is well-known among fashion blogs,” and “This blogger has a large fanbase.”

Finally, we tested the community cue with a similarly structured Likert scale (3 items; $\alpha = 0.92$) including items, “This blog features a list of similar blogs,” “This blog provides means to find and access comparable sites,” and “This blog links to other related weblogs.”

Blogger Credibility

Measurements of blogger credibility were based on Ohanian’s (1990) three-faceted approach to measuring source credibility, including measurements of attractiveness (5 items; $\alpha = 0.86$) (unattractive/attractive, not classy/classy, ugly/beautiful, plain/elegant, not sexy/sexy), trustworthiness (5 items; $\alpha = 0.92$) (undependable/dependable, dishonest/honest, unreliable/reliable, insincere/sincere, untrustworthy/trustworthy), and expertise (5 items; $\alpha = 0.94$) (not an expert/expert, inexperienced/experienced, unknowledgeable/knowledgeable, unqualified/qualified, unskilled/skilled). Together, we included 15 items measuring credibility ($\alpha = 0.94$). Each item took the form of a seven-point semantic differential scale.

Purchase Intent

Our purchase intent instrument included a three-item ($\alpha = 0.85$), seven-point Likert-type scale based on Pavlou & Gefen (2004). The scale ranged from, “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” It included the items: “Given the chance, I predict that I would consider purchasing an item featured on this blog in the future,” “It is likely that I will actually purchase an item featured on this blog in the near future,” and “Given the opportunity, I intend to purchase an item featured on this blog.”

Brand Halo

Brand halo effect was measured with a self-created, three-item ($\alpha = 0.89$), seven-point Likert scale, including items: “Anything sponsored by this brand is good quality,” “I would be more inclined to trust a company if it partners with this brand,” and “I would consider anything sponsored by this brand to be credible.” Responses were measured from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Sense of Community

We also measured participants’ perception of the blogger’s community with a self-created, three-item ($\alpha = 0.87$), seven-point Likert-type scale, including these items: “This blogger is part of a community of bloggers,” “This blogger knows other individuals who blog,” and “This blogger understands how to connect with fellow bloggers.”

Covariates

We introduced two covariates into this study: interest in fashion, and interest in fashion blogs. Each of these was measured by the same Likert-type scale described above. Fashion interest was measured with the three items ($\alpha = 0.93$), “I enjoy learning about fashion,” “Fashion is a topic of interest to me,” and “I consider fashion a part of my daily life.” Interest in fashion blogs was measured with the three items ($\alpha = 0.91$), “I regularly read fashion blogs online,” “I enjoy reading fashion blogs in my spare time,” and “Fashion blogs are a medium of interest to me.” These measures were self-created.

Data Analysis

Data collection was conducted on a rolling basis. The study was designed to be concluded after approximately 160 responses were collected, provided the period for earning extra credit was over. This would allow for eight cells of approximately twenty participants, each. We closed the study after collecting 164 responses. Upon conclusion of data collection, we removed all personally identifiable information, including names, professors, and email addresses from the data set.

Chapter 3

Results

Manipulations of bandwagon and community cues were both successful. Participants in the conditions with many followers ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.33$) scored significantly higher on the manipulation check items for the bandwagon cue than did the participants in low-bandwagon conditions ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(162) = -9.83$, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, participants in the conditions exposed to a blogroll ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.13$) scored significantly higher on the manipulation check items for the community cue than did the low-community participants ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(151.88) = -10.25$, $p < 0.001$.

The authority manipulation was not successful, and participants in the high-authority brand sponsor condition ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.72$) and the low-authority sponsor condition ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.42$) did not differ significantly in their scores on the authority manipulation check, $t(162) = -0.75$, $p = \text{n.s.}$ Additionally, only 25% of participants were able to correctly identify the brand sponsor from the stimulus.

ANCOVA Hypothesis Testing

The dependent variables were analyzed using a 2 (high versus low-authority sponsor) x 2 (high versus low bandwagon cue) x 2 (high versus low community cue) full-factorial ANCOVA, with prior interest in fashion and prior interest in fashion blogs as covariates.

Credibility

In our analysis of the authority, bandwagon and community cues on credibility, we found significant effects only for the “trustworthiness” aspect of credibility. The bandwagon cue had a significant main effect on trustworthiness, $F(1, 154) = 4.63, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.03$. Participants exposed to high-follower conditions ($M = 4.92, SE = 0.11$) had overall higher scores for trustworthiness than did low-follower participants ($M = 4.59, SE = 0.11$), supporting H3.

Similarly, the community cue had a significant main effect on trustworthiness, $F(1, 154) = 7.03, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.04$. Blogroll-condition participants ($M = 4.54, SE = 0.11$) had overall lower ratings of trustworthiness than non-blogroll participants ($M = 4.97, SE = 0.11$), thus disconfirming H5. Prior interest in fashion blogs was also found to be a significant covariate in this instance: $F(1, 154) = 5.97, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.04$.

The authority cue did not show any significant main effects on credibility; H1 was not supported. In cases where participants were able to identify the correct brand sponsor ($N = 41$), the cue did have a significant main effect on trustworthiness, $F(1, 31) = 4.57, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.13$. Participants with the high-authority brand sponsor ($M = 5.09, SE = 0.24$) had overall higher ratings of trustworthiness than the low-authority brand sponsor ($M = 4.39, SE = 0.22$). This only occurred in cases where participants successfully identified the brand sponsor.

Purchase Intent

ANCOVA analysis regarding purchase intent as a dependent variable did not show any significant results. We further explored associations between other variables and purchase intent during mediation analyses, described later.

Brand Halo

The bandwagon cue was found to have a significant main effect on brand halo, $F(1, 154) = 7.79, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.05$. Participants in the high-bandwagon condition ($M = 4.19, SE = 0.13$) had a higher sense of a halo around the brand sponsor than their counterparts in the low-bandwagon condition ($M = 3.66, SE = 0.14$). Prior interest in fashion was a significant covariate, $F(1, 154) = 5.94, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.04$.

Sense of Community

ANCOVA analysis revealed that the bandwagon cue had a significant main effect on participants' sense of the blogger's community, $F(1, 154) = 4.43, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.03$.

Participants who were exposed to a high number of followers ($M = 5.16, SE = 0.13$) felt that the blogger was part of a blogging community more so than participants who were exposed to a low number of followers ($M = 4.76, SE = 0.14$).

Mediation Hypothesis Testing

In order to test for the mediation proposed in H2, H4 and H6, we performed two serial mediation models and one simple mediation model. In conducting these tests for mediation on purchase intent, we used trustworthiness as a mediator in place of general credibility due to the main effects already discussed on trustworthiness. Prior interest in fashion and prior interest in fashion blogs were used as covariates in all tests, along with the other two independent variables.

For all of the mediation tests, 5,000 bootstrapped samples were used with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (Hayes, 2013).

The first test looked at the effect of high and low-authority brand sponsors on purchase intent through the serial mediation of first, brand halo, and second, trustworthiness. The authority manipulation did not produce any significant effects, but participants who indicated a high level of brand halo tended to show more trust in the blogger ($d_{21} = 0.13$), which then led to increased purchase intent ($b_2 = 0.12$). Participants with higher halo also showed a direct increase in purchase intent ($b_1 = 0.18$). Overall, no other significant indirect or direct effects were found, $c' = -0.08$, $p = 0.50$. H2 (Brand halo and blogger credibility will mediate the relationship between the authority cue and purchase intent) was not supported, as shown in Figure 5.

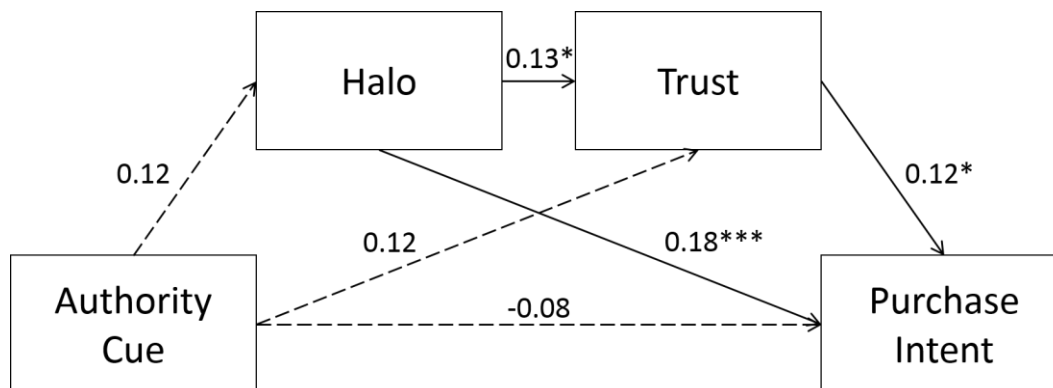


Figure 5. Serial Mediation of Authority Cue on Purchase Intent through Halo & Trust

The second test was a simple mediation test examining the effect of number of followers on purchase intent through trustworthiness. Participants in the high-bandwagon condition tended to show more trust in the blogger ($a_1 = 0.34$), and participants with more trust in the blogger showed a higher purchase intent ($b_1 = 0.16$). Consequently, there is a significant indirect effect of the bandwagon cue on purchase intent through trustworthiness ($a_1b_1 = 0.05$; 0.004, 0.149)

because the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero, supporting H4. The direct effect of bandwagon on purchase intent independent of trustworthiness was not significant, $c' = 0.07, p = 0.59$), as seen in Figure 6, thus suggesting that trust fully mediates the relationship between bandwagon cues and purchase intention.

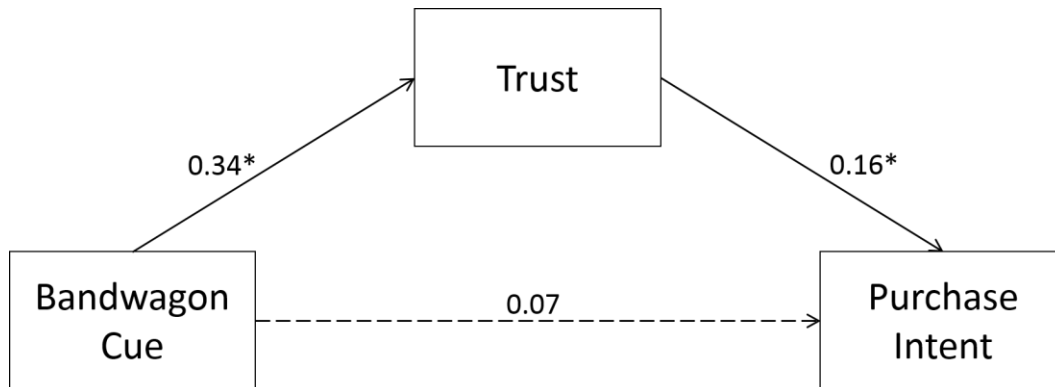


Figure 6. Simple Mediation of Bandwagon Cues on Purchase Intent through Trust

Finally, the third test examined the effect of community cues on purchase intent through participants' sense of the blogger's community and trustworthiness. Participants who were shown the blogroll had a significantly lower level of trust in the blogger ($a_2 = -0.45$). Greater trust showed an increase in purchase intent ($b_2 = 0.13$). This indicates a significant indirect effect of community cues on purchase intent through trustworthiness because the confidence interval for the direct effect did not include zero ($a_2b_2 = -0.06; -0.149, -0.004$). This disconfirms H6, since the mediation was present, but in the opposite direction of the hypothesis. Participants with increased sense of community also indicated increased trust ($d_{21} = 0.15$) and increased purchase intent ($b_1 = 0.12$). No other indirect or direct effects of community were found on purchase intent outside of trust, $c' = -0.14, p = 0.26$, seen in Figure 7.

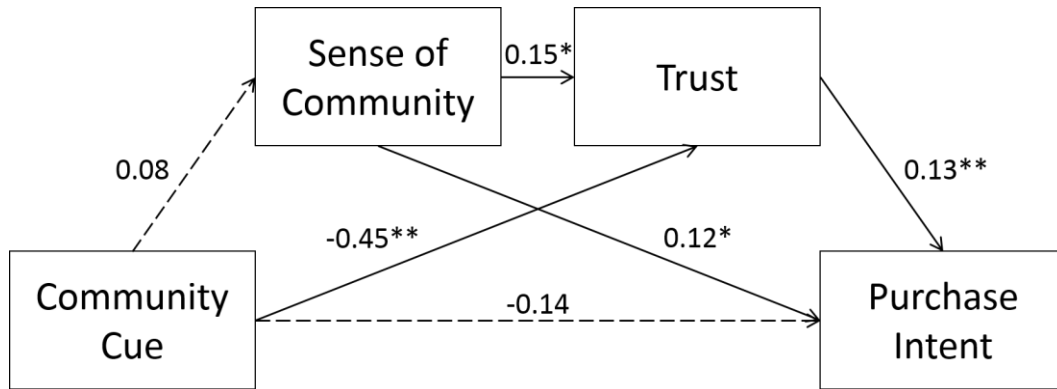


Figure 7. Serial Mediation of Community Cue on Purchase Intent through Sense of Community & Trust

Exploratory Mediation Testing

Guided by the results of the ANCOVA tests that indicated the significance of bandwagon cues in creating a halo around the brand and a sense of community around the blogger, we conducted two exploratory serial mediation tests of bandwagon cues on purchase intent.

In our first exploratory test, we used a serial mediation model of bandwagon cues through halo, through trustworthiness, to purchase intent. Participants in the condition with many followers tended to show increased brand halo ($a_1 = 0.55$). In turn, greater halo led to increased trust ($d_{21} = 0.13$), and greater trust led to increased purchase intent ($b_2 = 0.12$). This can be interpreted as a significant indirect effect of number of followers on purchase intent through halo and trustworthiness, since the confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero: $a_1 d_{21} b_2 = 0.01$; 0.000, 0.037. Increased halo also increased purchase intent independent of trust ($b_1 = 0.12$), indicating a second indirect effect of the bandwagon cue on purchase intent, this time through only halo, with a confidence interval that does not include zero ($a_1 b_1 = 0.10$; 0.029,

0.213). No other indirect or indirect effects of bandwagon on purchase intent were indicated in this mediation model, $c' = -0.02$, $p = 0.87$, shown in Figure 8.

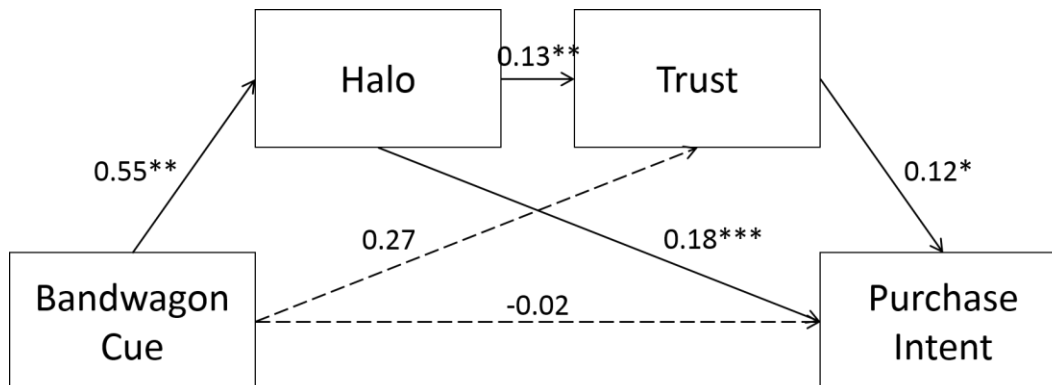


Figure 8. Serial Mediation of Bandwagon Cue on Purchase Intent through Halo & Trust

In our second exploratory model, we examined the effect of the bandwagon cues on purchase intent through sense of community and trustworthiness. Again, two indirect effects were found. Both effects were significant because their confidence intervals did not include zero: High-bandwagon condition participants tended to have a greater sense of the blogger's community ($a_1 = 0.39$), and a greater sense of community was found to increase purchase intent ($b_1 = 0.12$), indicating that a having many followers increases purchase intent through mediation with sense of community ($a_1b_1 = 0.05$; 0.003, 0.138). Increased sense of community also resulted in increased trust ($d_{21} = 0.15$), which in turn led to increased purchase intent ($b_2 = 0.13$). This is indicative of the second indirect effect of bandwagon cues on purchase intent, this time through sense of community and trust ($a_1d_{21}b_2 = 0.01$; 0.000, 0.031). No other indirect or direct effects were found on purchase intent from bandwagon cues in this model, $c' = 0.03$, $p = 0.82$, as visualized in Figure 9.

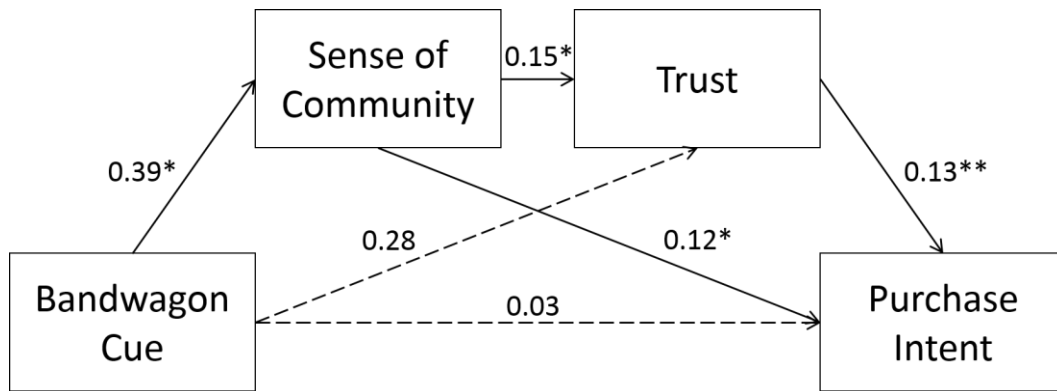


Figure 9. Serial Mediation of Bandwagon Cue on Purchase Intent through Sense of Community & Trust

The results of this second round of mediation testing provided an interesting answer to our proposed research question. While there were no interaction effects in the ANCOVA testing, meaning that there was no cue cumulation to speak of, we did find that having many followers caused a bandwagon effect that led to readers making further assumptions about the website, including an increased sense of community and increased halo around the brand of the blog's sponsor.

Chapter 4

Discussion

The above study examined the effects of the brand status of sponsorship, number of followers, and having a blogroll on the perceived credibility of a blog through the effects of heuristics, and how this relationship affected purchase intent for blog items. Our results found a significant bandwagon effect when a high number of followers was displayed on the blog, and we disconfirmed the hypothesis that presence of a blogroll would increase trust by displaying the blogger's community. Ultimately, our manipulation of brand sponsorship was unsuccessful; however, this still provides several practical insights for bloggers. We discuss these issues in turn below.

The study showed some interesting and unusual effects when we manipulated the number of followers. As per our manipulation checks, this served as a bandwagon heuristic, and ultimately, having more followers led to increased trustworthiness, perception of a sponsor brand halo, and an increased sense of the blogger's community with other bloggers. These last two results were particularly unexpected: only 25% of participants were able to correctly identify brand sponsors, and so linking that sponsor with a halo – anything they sponsor is good quality – is meaningful and shows the benefit that bloggers can give sponsors, provided the blogger has a large following. This effect is so powerful that it can take place when the reader cannot recall the brand sponsor by name. The transfer effects from the blogger to the sponsor could have something to do with the proximity of the blogger's site and the distance of the sponsor. Or perhaps the effect depends on the brand being unknown. Having many followers also led to the

assumption of the blogger being part of a community of bloggers and knowing how to interact with their blogging peers. These findings, in addition to the trust bestowed upon a blogger when they have many followers, indicates the huge value attributed to followers in the blogosphere and is a key to understanding the news reports of buying and selling followers online (De Micheli, & Stroppa, 2013). For bloggers, the study suggests that if one has followers, flaunt them.

The presence of a blogroll had some unexpected effects in the study. While the manipulation worked, the presence of a blogroll did not situate the blogger within a community, and did not increase the blogger's trustworthiness. In fact, the presence of a blogroll had just the opposite effect, decreasing trustworthiness, without regard to whether the reader felt the blogger was part of a blogging community. There are several possible explanations for this. First, the blogroll might have triggered a negative "old-media heuristic" (Sundar, 2008). Because the blogroll is a remnant from some of the first blogging technologies, it is possible that it decreased the credibility of the site because it is not widely used anymore. Another possibility is that it appeared to be an advertisement or was seen as name-dropping and non-reciprocal. Yet another possibility is that the participants could tell the blogs were not real, if they were familiar with fashion blogs previously. These explanations indicate that bloggers should think about other possible ways to situate themselves in a community, such as posting collaborative blog entries, interacting via multiple social networks, engaging with the audience in comments, and being transparent about sponsorship and advertising.

As for the authority cue, our operationalization of brand sponsorship was unsuccessful. Two possible phenomena can explain this: banner blindness or active avoidance. Banner blindness (Benway, 1998) is a term used to indicate situations where an individual subconsciously avoids looking at banner advertising. The space where the blogger had meant to

direct readers' attention was probably overlooked because it took the form of a banner. The second explanation is active avoidance, which is a more conscious reasoning for why readers may have not been able to identify the brand sponsor. If readers identified the sponsorship as a sort of advertisement when they visited the site, they may have consciously avoided looking at it due to either a bells-and-whistles or an intrusiveness heuristic (Sundar, 2008) triggered by the pop-up. Either situation would lead the reader to close the window automatically without necessarily looking at the sponsor or recording it into memory. In the future, bloggers should not present information they want users to see in this manner. Instead, they should find alternate means, by perhaps integrating the sponsors' products into the text of their blogs.

Finally, the exploratory mediation analysis produced some unexpected results. The primary takeaway is that having a high number of followers does not increase trust directly. Rather, we discovered two ways that having many followers can increase trust and thereby purchase intent for items on the blog. Both means to increase trust and purchase intent are accomplished when the reader makes other positive assumptions about the blog, first, through assuming a halo around the sponsoring brand, and second, by leading the reader to assume the presence of a blogging community. This indicates that to be considered credible, bloggers do not necessarily need high-authority brand sponsors or to be constantly interacting with a community. Rather, the presence of a bandwagon cue could unintentionally introduce other heuristics into judgments, as well. All of this demonstrates the powerful influence of bandwagon cues in shaping the credibility of a blog. Therefore, displaying strong bandwagon metrics is key to a successful blog.

Theoretically, the study's findings underscore the importance of reader metrics in determining the persuasive influence of blog posts, thereby leading support to the notion of

“bandwagon heuristic” proposed by the MAIN Model (Sundar, 2008). This idea is supported to such an extent that the traditional reliance on brand-name sponsors to imbue authority, which is quite common in traditional media platforms, is overshadowed by attention to follower support for the blog. Therefore, the dynamics of persuasion in social media are quite different from those in older media, with increased psychological importance of user tendency to be influenced socially by peers rather than by authority.

Limitations & Future Research

While the study above contributes both theoretical and practical knowledge to current understanding of how credibility judgments are made in an online context, we did encounter several opportunities to both expand and refine our results in the future. First, we limited our research to testing a single genre of blog – fashion – when there are many other types of blogging communities with their own nuances affected by online marketing. In the future, we foresee exploration of other content domains, including exercise blogs, cooking blogs, and other lifestyle blogs. We are also curious whether similar effects would be noticed on commercial blogs run by larger companies.

Second, a re-evaluation of the operationalization of brand sponsorship is in order. Ultimately, our manipulation of this cue failed, as the manipulation check items between the two groups were not significantly different. Further investigation will require operationalizing this variable differently: either in the inline eWOM position described in Kulmala et al. (2013) and Lu et al. (2014), or placing the sponsorship in the sidebar, where the other cues were located. In a sidebar location, we would ask the additional question: would the sponsorship be subject to

banner blindness (Benway, 1998), or would the sidebar be a better location for information toward which the blogger wants to draw attention, as indicated by the success of our other manipulations?

Next, we found some unexpected effects of having a large following on the reader's sense of community and perception of the sponsorship brand, but because we were not expecting these findings, we did not tailor our study to explore them. In future studies, we would like to further probe the extent to which the number of followers can impact perceptions of brand sponsors, and why having many followers leads to the assumption of a blogging community.

Finally, our study showed the effective manipulation of number of followers on a general platform: in the stimulus, the blogger's followers were not attributed to any particular social media platform, only the blog. However, many bloggers show social media numbers from other platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, or Google Plus, instead of or in addition to blog followers. Would the impact of having a large following differ if that following were for a different platform? Could bandwagon effects be amplified as cue-cumulation (Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Hastall 2007) if the blogger shows he or she has many followers on many platforms? Would we see a positive or negative effect if the blogger displays several numbers of followers, some very large and some very small? Ultimately, what could we do to amplify or challenge the bandwagon effect we saw in this study?

Conclusion

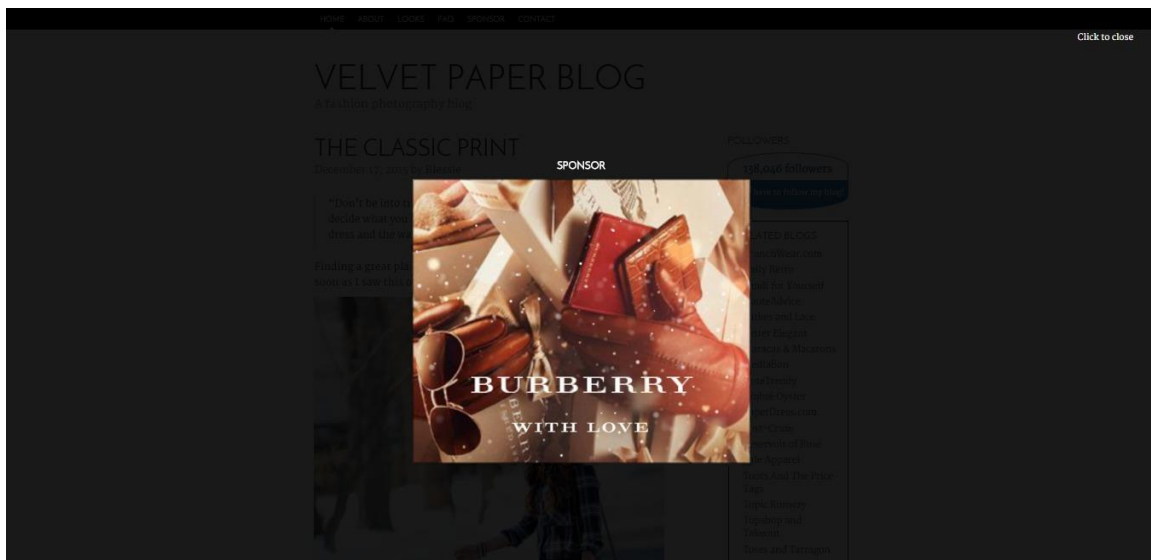
While this study provided several learning opportunities for future research, it also contributed valuable theoretical and practical knowledge to the effects of blogs in particular and

social media communications research in general. The study described the types of associations that could increase blogger credibility and purchase intent for items discussed within the blog.

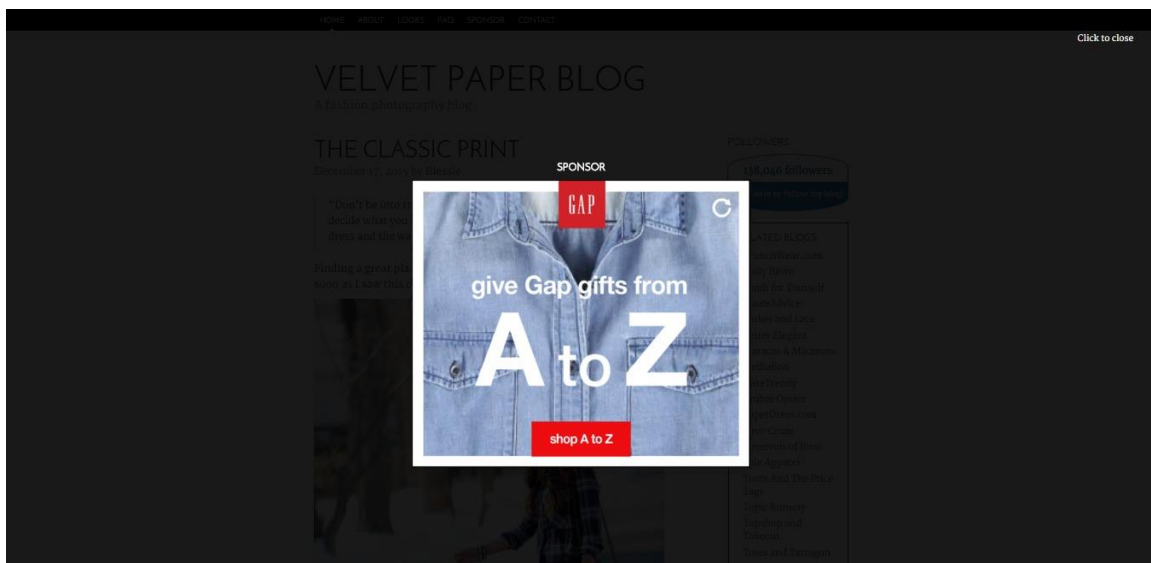
The bandwagon heuristic was brought forth in this instance as the most influential of the three by associating the blogger with a large number of followers. This then led readers to assume association with other bloggers and with a brand sponsor presumed to have a halo, thereby increasing the blogger's trustworthiness and the reader's purchase intent. Thus, our understanding of how bandwagon effects can strengthen a website's impression on the reader was reinforced and extended to the domain of social media.

Appendix

Stimulus Examples



High Authority Sponsor Overlay



Low Authority Sponsor Overlay

HOME
ABOUT
LOOKS
FAQ
SPONSOR
CONTACT

VELVET PAPER BLOG

A fashion photography blog

THE CLASSIC PRINT

December 17, 2015 by Blessie

“Don't be into trends. Don't make fashion own you, but you decide what you are, what you want to express by the way you dress and the way to live.” –Gianni Versace

Finding a great plaid shirt can be tricky. They can be a hit or miss. As soon as I saw this one, I thought it was a must have!



top – ZARA | jeans – AMERICAN EAGLE | shoes – SAINT LAURENT | bag – CHANEL | beanie – ASOS

I paired it with ripped jeans and a burgundy beanie which I thought went amazing with the color & print of the shirt. Rolling up the jeans a little bit emphasized these beautiful ankle boots and gave a great edgy & effortless vibe. I completed the look with a Chanel bag and gold accessories. Such a fun and casually cool outfit don't you think? ;)

FOLLOWERS

138,046 followers

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RELATED BLOGS

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- HauteAdvice
- Latkes and Lace
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- Maracas & Macarons
- MediaBon
- NoteTrendy
- Ombre Oyster
- PaperDress.com
- Post-Craze
- Reservoir of Rosé
- Tale Apparel
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High Bandwagon, High Community Conditions

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High Bandwagon, Low Community Conditions

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[Ombre Oyster](#)
[PaperDress.com](#)
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[Tale Apparel](#)
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[Tags](#)
[Topic Runway](#)
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[Takeout](#)
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Low Bandwagon, High Community Conditions

VELVET PAPER BLOG

A fashion photography blog

THE CLASSIC PRINT

December 17, 2015 by Blessie

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Low Bandwagon, Low Community Conditions

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Thesis Title

Credibility Heuristics in Fashion Blogs: Testing the Effects of Authority, Bandwagon and Community on Persuasion

Thesis Supervisor: S. Shyam Sundar

Presentations

Credibility in Fashion Blogs, presented at the Spring 2015 College of Communications Undergraduate Research Symposium at The Pennsylvania State University