

COMMERCIALISING SOCIAL MEDIA  
– A STUDY OF FASHION (BLOGO)SPHERES

Christofer Laurell





# Commercialising social media

A study of fashion (blogo)spheres

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To Alexandra



# Appended papers

This dissertation is based on the following papers, referred to by Roman numerals in the text.

## **Paper I**

Pihl, C., Sandström, C. (2013). Social media, value creation and appropriation – the business model of fashion bloggers in Sweden. *International Journal of Technology Management*, 61(3/4), 309–323.

## **Paper II**

Pihl, C. (2013). Brands, community and style – exploring linking value in fashion blogging. Forthcoming in *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*.

## **Paper III**

Pihl, C. (2013). When customers create the ad, and sell it – a value network approach. *Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science*, 23(2), 127–143.

## **Paper IV**

Pihl, C. (2013). In the borderland between personal and corporate brands – the case of professional bloggers. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 4(2), 112–127.





# Abstract

A common characteristic of the theoretical developments taking place within the field of social media marketing is that activities to which consumers devote themselves in social media settings shift power and influence from firms to consumers. Extant literature has therefore analysed the practices of consumers within social media and their potential implications for marketing. The current state of social media, however, suggests that these settings are undergoing a process of transformation. Although social media were initially characterised as non-commercial and non-professional in nature, firms have started to market and manage interactions taking place within these digital landscapes. From initially being characterised by its social base, this development implies that social media have become increasingly commercialised as consumer practices meet and rival professional practices.

The aim of this dissertation is to expand the literature on social media by describing the process through which they evolve from their initially social character to a commercial utility. More specifically, it seeks to develop a conceptual framework that captures the role of marketing processes that lead to the commercialisation of these spheres.

This is done mainly through a netnographic study of the Swedish fashion blogosphere in order to explain how and why (1) commercial values are created and appropriated in social media, (2) consumers organise around combinations of consumption objects in social media, (3) consumers and professionals interact within places being commercialised in the spatial setting of social media and (4) interaction between consumers and professionals in places in social media space affects users' articulation of identity and self-representation.

Drawing on theory of spheres, this dissertation proposes a sphereological understanding of social media that expands the role of marketing. It is suggested that social media may be understood as a collection of microspheres that, together, comprise a densely connected foam of spatiality and place. In these spheres, consumers, together with commercial actors, take part in practices that become increasingly commercial. From a sphereological perspective, the role of marketing becomes one of navigating in this foam in search of collective symbolic meanings of value materialising in this spatiality. This, in turn, means that marketing also becomes a matter of affecting, negotiating and redefining atmospheres situated in the spheres.

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# 1. Introduction

## Background

In September 2005, the first entry of a newly started Swedish blog was posted. The entry described the everyday life of a Swedish teenager and what had been going on that particular September day. There were friends to meet, school projects to finish and concerts to look forward to. And perhaps most of all, there was the thrill of having a platform where all these experiences of life could be shared with whoever happened to be interested.

What started out as an amateur expression for Isabella Löwengrip and her alter ego Blondinbella would, over the years, change rather dramatically. By the end of 2013, Löwengrip would be a prominent public figure in Sweden. Not only had she become a popular person in the digital realm where it all started, but also in traditional forms of media, where the blogger as well as her alter ego had become popular personalities.

One reason for the interest in and exposure of this individual was that the amateur expression that concerned the everyday life of a teenager soon gave way to several entrepreneurial ventures in the borderland between the marketing and the fashion sectors. The blog became one of the first to be operated as a limited company in the Swedish setting. Over time, an e-commerce business selling a wide range of products, a fashion design company selling the blogger's fashion collection, an investment company working with publishing and lecturing services as well as providing venture capital to the marketing sector, and finally a magazine were added to the list of ventures that Löwengrip chose to take part in over the years. What all these ventures had in common was that the blog functioned as the nexus where the story of the blogger unfolded.

There are many examples of how users of social media, and perhaps most particularly bloggers, have explored how social media can not only provide a platform for creating an online audience but also how these settings can create commercial values of different kinds. As these commercial values have become increasingly prevalent, this has also created challenges related to how these values later become appropriated.

In March 2008, a number of articles were published in the press reporting that the Swedish Consumer Agency had decided to start an investigation (e.g. Eriksson, 2008; Schori & Rislund, 2008; Ullberg, 2008). What was unique about this investigation was that it was to be focused on practices of bloggers, and especially fashion bloggers. The reason for the agency's interest was that several bloggers had admitted to having accepted payment in exchange for writing about particular brands and products on their blogs. A spokesperson for the Swedish Consumer Agency claimed that the border between advertising and editorial material, in some cases, had become hard to identify as a result. Therefore, the bloggers' activities might have been in breach of Swedish marketing law, which states that all advertising should be formulated and presented in such a manner that it is clear that it is advertising, and that it is also clear which actors are responsible for it.

About two years later, in April 2010, the Swedish Tax Agency also decided to start an audit (e.g. Svenska Dagbladet, 2010). This time, attention was centred on the bloggers themselves since, from the perspective of the Tax Agency, they had been engaged in business activities related to their blogs that may have generated taxable income. Therefore, the agency decided to audit the tax returns of a number of fashion bloggers to investigate whether or not these had been properly completed. Here, one particular aspect concerned the taxation of fringe benefits. The Agency had reason to believe that several of the bloggers it was auditing had been given products by producers who wanted these bloggers to write about their brands and products on their blogs. If this were to be proven, the bloggers would then be taxed for fringe benefits based on the market value of the products they had reviewed. In light of this investigation, the agency decided to conduct a follow-up audit about three years later, in November 2013. In this case, too, the investigation focused specifically on blogs and whether bloggers were adhering to the tax regulations (Nordström, 2013).

These examples provide insights into how popular users of social media over time have attracted commercial attention as a result of their blogging practices. They also indicate an emerging interest in understanding how to handle commercial values created in social media, not only among commercial actors but also among social media users themselves. From a broader perspective, this development raises questions about the relationship between consumers and commercial actors, and about the role of consumers situated in a borderland between consumption and commercial interests in social media settings.



## Research problem

Beyond the developments occurring in the Swedish fashion blogosphere, a broad interest in *social media marketing* has emerged in the marketing literature. This literature addresses the potential theoretical implications that arise as traditional marketing practices are being challenged by emerging consumer-dominated practices in social media. More specifically, extant literature has approached this phenomenon by explaining (1) the technical setting in which this phenomenon has emerged, (2) the role of consumers inhabiting these spaces and (3) the implications for firms related to marketing within and management of social media. These approaches, rooted in different theoretical traditions, will be subjects of further inquiry in Chapter 2. For the purpose of identifying the research problem of this dissertation, however, a brief account of these themes will be discussed in this section, which leads up to the aim of this dissertation.

What distinguishes social media from previous technological communication tools is that they build on the notion of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 represents platforms where content and applications are modified by all users in a collaborative and participatory manner (Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010). Among the wide array of social media available in the contemporary media landscape, blogs represent one of the earliest forms. Aggregated forms of social media types such as the blogosphere has been described as highly interconnected and representing “a densely interconnected conversation” (Herring et al., 2005, p. 1).

Studies venturing into the digital landscape of social media have analysed how users organise within this space as well as how they create user-generated content. Kaplan and Haenlien (2010) have described user-generated content as the sum of all ways in which users make use of social media. One of its characteristics is that it is created outside of professional routines, practices and the context of commercial markets (cf. Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010; OECD, 2007). Even though social media and user-generated content are essentially non-professional and non-commercial in nature, social media users have proven willing to take part in brand-centred communications that often materialise in community settings (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Because consumers take part in these activities, they have been conceptualised as participants in brands’ larger social construction and as thereby playing a vital role in brands’ ultimate legacy.

In light of this development, strategies for managing consumers and consumer groups have been proposed. It has been suggested that firms should adopt a disapproving approach when consumers negatively affect

their brands and products, and, in contrast, that they should adopt a facilitating response when consumer action instead contributes or co-creates brand value (cf. Berthon, Leyland & Campbell, 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). One of the underlying rationales for the latter strategic response is that consumers taking part in social media can generate consumption opportunities (Muñiz & Schau, 2011). Therefore, this could also potentially be considered a source of competitive advantage for firms (Dahlander, Frederiksen & Rullani, 2008).

The three approaches found in the literature on social media marketing could be viewed as parts of an emerging field that share the common aim of explaining implications of social media by applying different theoretical perspectives. A common characteristic of the theoretical developments taking place within these interrelated research subfields is that the activities of consumers in social media settings shift power and influence from firms to consumers (cf. Berthon et al., 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Kaplan & Haenli, 2010; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2007, 2011). Therefore, traditional ways of understanding the marketplace in terms of encompassing dyadic or network relations between consumers and commercial actors become increasingly challenging in social media settings. This occurs as consumers seem to internalise commercial features in the brand-centred activities in which they take part in this digital media landscape (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz, He & Vargo, 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007).

The literature on social media marketing has illustrated the emergence of a technical setting where activities in which consumers take part affect firms; this evokes strategic responses from the firms as they attempt to manage these value-creating activities (cf. Berthon et al., 2008; Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). The idea that firms should respond strategically in order to manage consumers' activities in social media, however, implies that the role of consumers becomes affected. Cases where firms approach consumers in order to facilitate activities that create or co-create value challenge the idea of user-generated content being of a non-commercial and non-professional nature, independent from professional practices (cf. Kaplan & Haenli, 2010; OECD, 2007). Such cases also imply a transformation of the social media landscape, originally characterised by its social base, into one that is increasingly commercial as consumer practices meet professional practices.

An analysis of this problem would add to extant literature on social media marketing by explaining how social media evolve from social into increasingly commercialised spheres. In this context, the role of consumers and how the interplay between consumers and firms materialises in the spatial settings of social media – thereby challenging borders between consumer-dominated

practices and professional-dominated practices – become central issues to be theoretically explained.

## Aim

The aim of this dissertation is to expand the literature on social media by describing the process through which they evolve from their initially social character to a commercial utility. More specifically, it seeks to develop a conceptual framework that captures the role of marketing processes that lead to the commercialisation of these spheres.

## Dissertation outline

This dissertation consists of four appended articles as well as this cover paper. The following chapter of this cover paper presents a thematic review of literature on social media marketing. This review is organised around (1) the notion of social media as space and place, (2) the role of consumers in the spatial settings of social media, (3) how fashion and style materialise in the social media landscape, (4) how processes of value creation have been approached in these settings and (5) how processes of commercialisation have been theoretically explained. At the end of this chapter, four research questions are derived from extant literature. Chapter 3 presents the three studies that together form the empirical foundation of this dissertation and discusses applied methods relating to data collection and analysis as well as research design. Chapter 4 presents a summary of the appended papers and their main findings and contributions. This is followed by Chapter 5, which analyses key findings drawn from the appended papers in relation to the derived research questions. Chapter 6 brings together the key findings, discusses them in relation to the formulated aim, and presents the conclusions and directions for future research.



## 2. Social media marketing – an overview of concepts and approaches

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an extensive review of extant literature within the field of social media marketing. To navigate through the many applications available in the social media landscape, a review of general characteristics of the technical and social structure of social media is first offered. Following this overview, social media are approached using the conceptualisations of space and place in order to discuss the spatial features of social media in general and blogs and the blogosphere in particular. This is followed by a discussion on the role of consumers inhabiting social media space. This discussion relates to the blurring of the border between consumers and firms and its consequences for marketing and brand-centred communications. This section takes as its point of departure the general setting of social media. The subsequent section describes the specific characteristics found in the setting of fashion blogs and the fashion blogosphere. This is followed by a review of how value is created and co-created in the borderland between consumer practices and professional practices. The section after that presents a review of how commercialisation has been conceptually explained. This section also deals with how the role of consumers in terms of social practices has been conceptually understood in relation to commercialisation.

The last section of this chapter discusses the link between the reviewed bodies of literature and their associated concepts. It specifies the common ground of central conceptualisations and presents the theoretical approach applied in this dissertation. It places particular emphasis on the link between social media as a space encompassing a wide array of places, the role of consumers, and commercialisation of places through social practices. Based on this discussion, four research questions are derived.

### Social media as space and place

Social media have been referred to as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan &

Haenlien, 2010, p. 61). Web 2.0 refers to platforms where content and applications are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative manner. User-generated content refers to the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media. Another related definition of social media has suggested that this form of media “describes the variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004, p. 2).

Early explorations of digital communication focused particular attention on self-representation and identity to understand how issues of affinity and anonymity could be explained (e.g. Turkle, 1997). Even though web-based communication, ever since its emergence, has undergone a rapid development in terms of how audio, image and video services have changed the way Internet users communicate with each other, the written word remains the most important aspect of digital communication. This affects how social interaction between users takes place. Berg (2011) described how the online world differs from the offline world in that it enables users, prior to taking action, to examine, reflect, manipulate, and try different actions before choosing the most suitable alternative. If an action does not seem appropriate from the user’s perspective after it has been taken, it is often possible to undo it before it has generated any social response. Therefore, digital communication requires the individual user to make active choices regarding such aspects as self-representation which might not be the case to the same extent in offline life.

The contemporary state of the web, however, suggests that Internet users are increasingly willing to share information with one another about themselves, what they do, and what parts of the web they visit. For this reason, critics have suggested that the divide of offline and online life has become problematic as the border has become increasingly blurred (Berg, 2011; Kozinets, 2010). In an attempt to bridge this divide, Baym (2006) has suggested that offline contexts always influence online ones, and that online expectations and situations feed back into the offline experience.

In view of this discussion and as the term *social media* suggests, it captures and explains both the technical tools for communicating information and also how users make use of social media, such as for socialising, connecting, communicating and interacting with one another (cf. Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004; Correa, Hinsley & De Zúñiga, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010).

In view of the vast array of technical applications that together represent different manifestations of social media, a central issue has been to explain how these can be categorised. By drawing from the concepts of social

presence, media richness, self-presentation and self-disclosure, Kaplan and Haenlien (2010) offered the classification presented in Table 1. Social presence in social media settings was suggested to be the degree of social presence, in the contact between communicating partners, that a medium allowed for. This, in turn, also affected or influenced the two communication partners' behaviour (c.f. Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). Media richness was suggested to represent the degree of richness a medium allows for. This was represented by the amount of information a medium allows to be transmitted over a given period of time (cf. Daft & Lengel, 1986). Self-representation was explained as social interaction with the aim of controlling the impressions of others. This therefore related to a wish to communicate one's personal identity (cf. Goffman, [1959] 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003) and potentially gain various benefits by doing so. The closely related concept of self-disclosure, that is, revealing personal information, thus becomes the result of self-representation.

**Table 1.** Classification of social media presented by Kaplan and Haenlien (2010, p. 62)

		Social presence / Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs	Social network sites (such as Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (such as Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia)	Content communities (such as YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (such as World of Warcraft)

Blogs are a prevalent example of social media – and have been argued to represent the earliest form of social media (Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010). Blogs have been defined as modified websites maintained by individuals in which comments, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or videos are posted in a reverse chronological sequence (Blood, 2002; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Shen & Chiou, 2009). Blogs are often personal expressions, and their production entails a high degree of personal creativity and ownership (Gunter, 2009). Even though these ascribed characteristics suggest blogs to be characterised mainly by individual expression and control, this form of media also allows for communal relations to take place (Kozinets, 2010; Rettberg, 2008).

Blogs are collectively part of the blogosphere, described as “the aggregation of millions of online diaries known as ‘blogs’” (Keren, 2006, p. 1) or as the “the space created and occupied by weblogs” (Baoill, 2004, p. 2). With respect to the argued collective nature of individual blogs (Kozinets, 2010; Rettberg, 2008), related views on the blogosphere have suggested that it manifests “a densely interconnected conversation, with bloggers linking to other bloggers, referring to them in their entries, and posting comments on each other's blogs” (Herring et al., 2005, p. 1).

In view of these characteristics, blogs can be viewed as settings where users not only exhibit a high degree of self-presentation and self-disclosure (cf. Gunter, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010), but where, furthermore, the interaction that takes place between users in the aggregated setting of the blogosphere over time generates relationships and therefore a higher degree of social presence between users (cf. Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010). As the borders between manifestations of social media have been shown to be blurry, and as users do not necessarily utilise only one but rather many forms of social media by integrating them with one another, for example, in blogs (through embedded YouTube videos or Facebook fan page widgets), this indeed makes a systematisation of different social media applications problematic (cf. Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010).

One way of approaching this challenge is by drawing on the concepts of space and place. These two concepts are highly interrelated in that “(w)hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan 1977, p. 6). Put differently, space refers to “a realm without meaning” (Cresswell 2004, p. 10) while place, in contrast, is associated with meaning imbued in a location. In the work of Malpas, place is understood in the following way:

The idea of place encompasses both the idea of the social activities and institutions that are expressed in and through the structure of a particular place (and which can be seen as partially determinative of the place) and the idea of the physical objects and events in the world (along with the associated causal processes) that constrain, and are sometimes constrained by, those social activities and institutions. (Malpas, 1999, p. 35)

In view of this approach to space and place, other scholars have emphasised place as being founded in everyday practices and, for this reason, being constructed and constantly performed by iterations of practices (Cresswell, 2004; cf. Seamon, 1980; Thrift, 1996, 1997). Understanding place from this perspective stress that struggles around meanings and identity become central. One of the works that inspired this approach has suggested that:



Places can be made visible by a number of means: rivalry or conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials and rites. [...] Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life. (Tuan, 1977, p. 178).

When applying these conceptualisations of space and place to social media, applications that have been introduced over the years could be argued to represent a digital space created by these technologies. When this technologically underpinned space becomes populated by users bound by ideological foundations of such concepts as Web 2.0 (cf. Kaplan & Haenli, 2010), these inhabitants not only create digital places but also social meanings for them. This meaning creation could be explicated through the social interactions in these places that become visible and also documented through user-generated content that is created based on social practices being negotiated in both online and offline contexts (cf. Blackshaw & Nazzari, 2004; Correa, Hinsley & De Zúñiga, 2010).

If social media are understood as a space undergoing inhabitation, encompassing a wide landscape of places, the inhabitants and their associated practices become central to understanding the development of these interrelated places. This approach implies a reduction in the role of technical social media applications in social media space (cf. Kaplan & Haenli, 2010). Instead, places that are becoming inhabited by users because of shared social meanings become a central component. Relating to the arguments proposed by Baym (2006) regarding the interconnectedness between offline and online contexts, this approach suggests that not only context but also meanings, conflicts and social practices embedded in context feed back and forth between these worlds. Another complementary way of approaching this interconnectedness is to draw from the related works of Soja (1989, 1999), which suggested that place materialises as being lived, practised and inhabited space. As long as a place encompasses a relatively immobile interconnection with its inhabitants, the place has been suggested to be “constantly implicated in the construction of ‘us’ (people who belong in a place) and ‘them’ (people who do not)” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 39, cf. Harvey, 1996).

This spatial approach therefore differs from previous views of social media as it suggests that social media represent inhabited places that become interconnected with each other in social media space – places that are also embedded in the offline world (cf. Baoill, 2004; Baym, 2006; Herring et al., 2005; Keren, 2006). As in the offline world, social media materialise as lived, practised and inhabited space (cf. Soja, 1989, 1999). Such a perspective therefore explains why blogs, for example, start to exist in light of

processes of inhabitation that encompass social interaction explicating meanings related to place that create borders distinguishing inhabitants and non-inhabitants (cf. Cresswell, 2004; Harvey, 1996).

Rather than addressing the spatial character of social media, the following sections will instead focus on the inhabitants of places. This is done by reviewing the role of consumers in places found in social media relating to one of the main themes in the social media marketing literature – namely, the blurring border between consumers and professionals.

## Consumers in social media

The idea that the border between consumers and producers would start to blur in the context of, and as a result of, emerging digital technologies can be traced back to the works of Toffler (1970, 1980). In this blurring borderland, consumers were suggested to increasingly become transformed into *prosumers* (Toffler, 1980; see also Kotler, 1986). In recent years, the concepts of prosumer and prosumption have undergone a renaissance. A large number of works targeting different aspects of prosumers' interactions through digital technology have been presented (e.g. Bandulet & Morasch, 2005; Bradshaw & Brown, 2008; Ribiere & Tuggle, 2010). In this growing literature stream, a central theme has also evolved, explaining the interplay between prosumption expressions and social media. Pascu et al. (2008) suggested that the roles of producers and consumers had not only begun to blur in these settings but also to merge. In social media, the user is a supplier of content. The user also supports, or even provides, channels of distribution of content and services. Moreover, the user plays an essential role in finding, selecting and filtering relevant content and services through, for instance, search engine ranking, wikis, tagging, taste sharing, information sharing and feedback and reputation systems. In light of these arguments, Pascu et al. argued that “(t)his idea of the prosumer is of course not new, as coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 [...] What is different however, is that now, the idea is becoming reality” (2008, p. 39). It has also been suggested that the prosumption activities in the context of social media should be understood as being more extensive than previously argued. One illustrative example was provided by Ritzer and Jurgenson, who argued that “what we see with digital prosumption online is the emergence of what may be a new form of capitalism” (2010, p. 31).

One of the theoretical fields that has devoted a great deal of attention to the role of consumers in society and marketing, drawing on seminal works related to prosumers and prosumption (e.g. Toffler, 1970, 1980) is consumer culture theory (CCT). CCT refers to a group of theoretically related

perspectives that aim to address cultural complexity and the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Within this literature stream, a number of theoretical concepts attempting to explain the changing role of consumers have been developed.

As a way to target collective expressions related to commercial contexts, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) presented the concept of brand community – a community centred on a branded good or service. Brand communities were conceptualised as participants in brands' larger social construction, thereby playing a vital role in the brands' ultimate legacy. Brand communities, like other communities, are characterised by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility among its members. Inspired by Gusfield (1978), Muñiz and O'Guinn described a shared consciousness as consciousness of kind in terms of “the intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another” (2001, p. 413). Rituals and traditions, they argued, represent social processes with the main aim of reproducing and transmitting the meaning of the community, both within and beyond the community. In light of these aspects, they described moral responsibility as consisting of a sense of duty to the community from the perspective of its members. More specifically, this aspect also acts as the underlying driving force that produces collective action that contributes to the cohesion of a group.

With regard to the notion of brand community, several works have illustrated consumption activities focusing attention on brands in similar community settings encompassing commercial features (e.g. Kozinets, 2001; Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Schau et al. (2009) argued that a common characteristic of this plethora of works has been a focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual communities. Based on this finding, they presented a framework for understanding generic value-creating practices taking place among communities encompassing commercial features consisting of: (1) social network practices, (2) impression management practices, (3) community engagement practices, (4) and brand use practices.

These aspects of community practices, however, have not been addressed only within the empirical analysis of brand communities and meta-analysis of generic practices. They have also occupied the discussion of the field relating to the more general theoretical question of what binds members of communities together. In this discussion, the notion of *linking value* has been proposed (Cova, 1997). In brand communities, goods and services have been understood to be valued by consumers through their linking value in terms of permitting and supporting communal social interaction. This understanding of linking value in brand communities has been criticised with the argument

that the attention paid to one particular brand limited the study of communities. Instead of focusing on particular individual brands or activities in order to explain linking value of communities, it has been suggested that linking value is able to materialise through a combination of them all. It has also been shown that community is dependent on the external world, such as the media and sources from popular culture, in constructing its internal codes. More specifically, Ostberg argued that linking value could entail “carefully assembling, displaying, and using various consumption objects to create just the right ambience of being ‘in the know’” (2007, p. 104).

One setting where the assembly, display and use of combinations of consumption objects are central components is in the fashion industry. Studies of communities materialising around fashion have illustrated that these places are characterised by particular social practices (e.g. Chittenden, 2010; Kim & Jin, 2006; Thomas, Peters & Tolson, 2007; also see McCormick & Livett, 2012). When combined, consumption objects drawn from this industry setting can influence or create fashion and also the related notion of style. The next section reviews the role of fashion and style in social media space and places in the form of fashion blogs.

## Fashion in social media

A common characteristic among several of the influential works dealing with the concept of fashion has been the intrinsic relationship between fashion, society and social characteristics (Blumer, 1969; Bourdieu, [1984] 1993; Simmel [1904] 1957; Veblen [1899] 1970). One illustrative example of this interplay can be found in the metaphor that fashion functions as a mirror of society. In this metaphor, the relationship between society and fashion is described in terms of clothing representing and mirroring the collective attitudes and the corresponding interests of a community – a process that adapts itself to the continuous change in cultural values (Brenninkmeyer, 1963, p. 112). From this perspective, fashion can emerge as a result of individual choice. This choice, however, always has a deeper social significance.

Contemporary works have argued that the rise of postmodern culture has had a significant impact on the role of fashion. The importance of one’s self-image and identity has become one of the central aspects in the conceptualising of fashion. More specifically, fashion consumption has increasingly become regarded as a form of role-play where consumers seek to project conceptions of their identity – a process that is constantly evolving (Kawamura, 2005; cf. Turkle, 1997).

The conceptualisation of fashion is closely related to the notion of style. Traditional conceptualisations have suggested that style functions as a way to differentiate subculture groups from one another through the creation of different styles with different meanings (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). This as a characteristic trait of style is the intrinsic feature of combining, assembling and modifying consumer objects (Ostberg, 2007). Put differently, style, by definition, implies that sets of consumer objects are necessary in its creation (Hebdige, 1979).

One consequence of the great variety of consumption objects available in the contemporary fashion industry has been the emergence of a cool-hunting industry. This industry aims to instantaneously incorporate trends and fashions rising within youth cultures. As findings from such endeavours materialise into products and thereby become commodities in marketplaces, struggles of expressions in terms of both fashion and identity have been argued to become increasingly present (Kjeldgaard, 2009). In this context, there has been increasing discussion about practices, strategies and counter-narratives of demythologization aiming to create symbolic boundaries between identity-relevant fields of consumption, as these processes have been shown to threaten the value of consumers' identity projects (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Kjeldgaard, 2009). A closely related stream of research using consumption (Solomon & Englis, 1996) and product and brand constellations (Solomon and Assael, 1987) as the point of departure has undergone a similar shift. In this literature, actions of anti-constellations (Hogg, 1998; Hogg & Michell, 1996), anti-consumption and brand avoidance (Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2008) have been illustrated.

Taken together, the concepts of consumption, product and brand constellations, and the concepts of fashion and style, materialise through the use of sets of consumer objects where struggle is an intrinsic feature. Furthermore, these conceptualisations illustrate that not only marketers but also consumers have the ability to associate and combine brands through use and experience, and perhaps especially in the fashion industry (e.g. Englis & Solomon, 1994).

In the spatial settings of social media, fashion blogs have proven to be clear examples of places where consumers are associating and combining brands. Fashion blogs often contain thoughts, opinions and experiences that are expressed by combining texts and images (Rickman & Cosenza, 2007). In blog posts, entries tend to discuss events taking place in bloggers' everyday lives, and chosen outfits and fashion items found both online and offline. Meanwhile, blog posts often embed a combination of images such as personal photographs, professional photographs from fashion shows, fashion magazine photos and images of products (Chittenden, 2010).

Influential fashion bloggers have been viewed as opinion leaders that use their blogs as spaces where self-stories concerning fashion consumption unfold. In these settings, branded storytelling has been shown to materialise through various sub-practices related to the more general fashion blogging practice. These sub-practices encompass both implicit and explicit self-brand associations, present fashion brands as objects of desire and use brands as identity-construction partners. Taken together, this has been suggested to represent “reversed brand communication” as branded storytelling in the setting of fashion blogs seems to strive to appeal both to consumers and brands (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).

In view of the issues addressed up to this point, relating to the spatial approach to social media and the practices consumers take part in, the next section will approach the issue of value creation in social media settings. This is done by first taking the general perspective of marketplaces, and then moving closer to how value creation and value co-creation materialise in specific places in social media space in terms of fashion blogs.

## Value creation in social media

With regard to how the border between consumers and professionals has become increasingly blurred as a result of digital technology, it has been suggested that the notions of co-creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b) and brand co-creation (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009) can be used to explain how value is created. Relating to the discussed variety of consumption objects available in many marketplaces, the locus of value creation has, from this perspective, been argued to be situated in interaction taking place between consumers and firms. In processes of co-creation, points of interaction offer opportunities for both value creation and extraction. Co-creation thereby converts the market into a forum where consumers, firms, consumer communities, and networks of firms operate. From this perspective, the notion of co-creation shifts to consumers some of the influence and power that have traditionally been attributed to firms. In the settings of these forums, however, actors as firms and consumers are not necessarily acting with the same interests in mind. Therefore, it has been suggested that value co-creation should not be understood as generic in the way it materialises. Instead, it is dependent on different types of interactions taking place between these actors (Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2011).

As consumers create and co-create value by integrating a wide variety of consumption objects into practices materialising in places in social media, a search for new marketing techniques in the realm of user-generated content has emerged (Chen, Fay, & Wang, 2011; De Vries, Gensler, & Leeftang,

2012; Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). From the perspective of firms, several works have suggested how to manage consumers that engage in different forms of brand-centred communications. Berthon et al. (2008) suggested four strategic positions that a company can consider: it can disapprove, repel, applaud or facilitate. Facilitating was argued to be the “riskiest and least controllable” response (Berthon et al., 2008, p. 19) because consumers may get the impression that they have the company’s approval to express their opinions about the firm’s brands and products. However, it has been suggested that a shift has occurred in several firms, from disapproval to adoption of a co-opting facilitating stance as an attempt to exert control over brand-centred communications. What Berthon et al. (2008) suggested to be a risky venture from a managerial point of view has been contrasted by Schau et al. (2009), who explained why companies should participate in a broad array of practices to embrace the possibilities that brand communities provide, such as generating consumption opportunities (see also Muñiz & Schau, 2011).

The idea that consumers can be managed and the notion of co-creation have been criticised. One of the concepts illustrating this critique is the notion of *vigilante marketing*, defined as “unpaid advertising and marketing efforts, including one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many commercially oriented communications, undertaken by brand loyalists on behalf of the brand” (Muñiz & Schau, 2007, p. 187). Digital technologies such as inexpensive desktop audio, video and animation software have enabled consumers to create promotional content that rivals professional-quality content. In view of the co-creation literature, vigilante marketing has been illustrated to represent a potentially independent form of action; as Muñiz and Schau (2007) have argued, “consumers are not cocreating meaning; they are sole-authoring it” (p. 198, cf. Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2011).

It has been suggested that, within the fashion industry, consumers who create, read, and join discussions in fashion blogs can potentially affect the industry’s dynamics by changing how fashion forecasting is carried out. As consumers express their preferences regarding the abundance of available consumption objects and create constellations of products and brands in blogs, they present a source of untapped fashion data. It has been suggested that tapping this data could provide an opportunity to extract the next “real” trend (Rickman & Cosenza, 2007). This is because consumers taking part in these expressions also act as filters that select and create branded content to often dedicated readers (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).

Readers take part in blogs and interact with bloggers in order to be part of an exchange process (Chittenden, 2010). In this process, readers seek to acquire information and recommendations about products and brands “to better

understand the world they live in and also to consume insights, secrets, gossip, and some of the bloggers' privacy" (Kretz & de Valck, 2010, p. 326). From the perspective of fashion bloggers, the reason they blog has been explained by drawing on works by Bourdieu ([1984] 1993, 1996). More specifically, it has been argued that blogs represent a potential source of cultural capital that is acquired when bloggers post entries about wearing particular fashion brands. This cultural capital can in turn generate social capital relating to membership in the "in-crowd". As these peer-based exchanges and validation interactions take place, the mediated places of fashion blogs also allow bloggers to try out identity expressions that might be deemed risky in offline life (cf. Chittenden, 2010; Berg, 2011).

As these exchanges of meanings related to fashion and style take place in blogs, the conceptualisation of online visual representation also becomes highly interrelated with the offline identity. More specifically, this has been explained to materialise as a co-presence of online and offline contexts (Chittenden, 2010). The actual brand usage itself (cf. Schau et al., 2009) has also been shown to evoke status and prestige for the users. Therefore, brands have been illustrated to act as vehicles for expressing uniqueness from the perspective of fashion bloggers (Tynan, McKechnie & Chhoun, 2010).

In light of the reviewed conceptualisations that aim to explain how consumers organise around and create value relating to commercial objects in offline and online worlds, the social media space can be considered to have become inhabited by not only consumers and professionals but also consumption objects such as products and brands, and constellations of these objects. In light of this development, social media therefore seem to represent a space where places characterised primarily by their social features (Gunter, 2009), places where consumers interact with commercial objects independently (Muñiz & Schau, 2007), and places where consumers, commercial objects and commercial actors interact (Kim & Jin, 2006; Thomas et al., 2007; also see McCormick & Livett, 2012) have materialised over time. With these observations in mind, the studies mentioned up to this point present a helpful but incomplete body of knowledge about how social places increasingly encompassing commercial features. In addition, the role of consumers in places being transformed from primarily social into increasingly commercial ones also needs to be explained.

In order to address these gaps, the next section reviews how commercialisation has been conceptually explained. It takes as its point of departure commercialisation as a macro process and as a process taking place within the boundaries of firms. These perspectives on commercialisation will thereafter be critically reviewed by discussing how consumers and social



practices can potentially affect processes of commercialisation in the setting of places in social media space.

## Commercialisation, society and firms

In its most fundamental meaning, to *commercialise* means to “develop commerce in” or “to manage on a business basis for profit” (Merriam Webster Online, n.d.). Works in the field of economic history have suggested that commercialisation on a societal level encompasses both a weaker and a stronger definition than this general one. The weaker definition refers to growth in the total amount of commercial activity over a period of time while the stronger definition refers to commercial activity that has grown faster than a population over a period of time (Britnell, 1996, p. xiii). If commercialisation in the weaker sense of the word occurred in a society, this was indicated by multiplication of trading institutions, growth of towns and growth in the quantity of money circulating in the economy. Meanwhile, if commercialisation in the stronger sense occurred, this was indicated by an increased proportion of goods and services produced each year being traded, thereby making people increasingly dependent on the market or on selling and buying. By applying these definitions, Britnell (1996) argued, in a study of the commercialisation of English society between 1000 and 1500, commercialisation in this setting could be understood as the complex result of decisions taken by a varied set of actors including governments, landlords, merchants, peasants, artisans and labourers. Taken together, commercialisation thus represented a complex and dynamic process and a fundamental aspect of social change.

Not only have commercialisation processes on a societal level been studied; subsectors of economies have also been analysed. A plethora of works focusing on this issue have been presented, included such sectors as agriculture (Bharadwaj, 1985), health care (Mohan, 1991), education (Ginsburg, Espinoza, Popa, & Terano, 2003), housing (Wang & Murie, 1996) and technology (Jolly, 1997). Also in these cases, the social implications have often been among the main themes.

In view of works seeking to explain and conceptualise commercialisation processes in different sectors of the economy and on the societal level, the body of literature dealing with commercialisation within the field of marketing has provided several definitions of commercialisation that take the perspective of firms. In these definitions, commercialisation has often been referred to as the introduction of new products into the market (Armstrong & Kotler, 2008; Kotler, Armstrong, Wong, & Saunders, 2008) the decision to market a product (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2008) or decisions about full-

scale manufacturing and marketing plans and preparing budgets (Pride & Ferrell, 2010). A common characteristic of these definitions is that commercialisation is viewed as being integrated in, and representing the final stage of, the process of new product development (Jolly, 1997; Lamb et al., 2008; Rafinejad, 2007). The commercialisation stage, however, has also been suggested to include sub-processes that occur both pre- and post-introduction (e.g. Jolly, 1997; Kotler et al., 2008; Lamb et al., 2008). In view of this literature, these definitions capture several interrelated aspects and processes that illustrate the wide array of meanings assigned to commercialisation.

Definitions emphasising that commercialisation within the boundary of firms mainly consists of managerial decision making, however, raise the question of whether firms are autonomous in commercialising products and services. In this context, the role of firms' internal capabilities, such as human and technological resources, has been assigned importance for the success of commercialisation (Zahra & Nielsen, 2002). Chen (2009) suggested that commercialisation functions as a mediator between organisational resources, innovative capabilities and new venture performance. External resources, however, have been argued to also represent a fundamental aspect of the potential success of commercialisation. Gans and Stern (2003) provided support for the idea that the commercialisation environment in which firms operate often affects decision making related to strategy. Taken together, this literature has tended to assign minor importance to the social and societal effects of commercialisation. More specifically, the locus of the commercialisation processes has mainly been understood to be situated within the boundaries of firms, even though it has been argued that external resources can improve the probability of commercial success.

## Commercialisation and consumers

In contrast to the views on commercialisation presented in the previous section, sociologists and scholars in the field of CCT have instead focused on the societal consequences of commercialisation relating to moral dilemmas and challenges (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). One example of such challenges has been illustrated with reference to the commercialisation of rock music (Plasketes, 1992). In this part of the cultural industry, a process of commercialisation started to take place in the 1970s as entrepreneurs began to identify and appropriate commercial values. Plasketes argued that music during this period “became a product – a commercially viable item to be packaged, promoted, merchandised, and marketed” (1992, p. 150) and as a result, the industry became increasingly professionalised. The illustration of this process also revealed how struggles, similar to how Bourdieu ([1984] 1993) explained power in cultural indu-

stries, took place over the course of this industry's development. In this specific case, musicians represented the established actors adopting a conservation stance, while the emergent commercial actors bringing in a logic derived from professional advertisers and marketers adopted a subversive stance. The history of the commercialisation of rock music thus illustrated how actors who took part in a cultural expression and created commercial value without necessarily appropriating this value's full potential, over time, became integrated into a process of commercialisation as a result (Plasketes, 1992).

Other works within this body of literature have shown that the commercialisation of human social life has not been limited to music. In a study analysing the fitness industry, Sassatelli (2000, see also 2010) discussed the commercialisation of self-discipline and leisure time, where fitness gyms were understood to offer the commercial institution in which this took place. Also in the intersection between sports and fashion, social implications of commercialisation have been examined. In this context, the interplay between fashion, commercialisation and authenticity has been analysed in relation to consumer meaning creation. Murray argued that:

What starts out as a concrete, local, and contextualized fashion, something that may be perceived as not yet commercial and therefore authentic, is drained of its original sign value as it is marketed and mainstreamed. If one's customization of the code appears authentic, it has value, which is exactly what marketing research communities are after. When the consumer's appropriation of countervailing meanings is done in the context of distinction, then commercialization of the style creates a staged authenticity, and the consumer may move on to something new. (2002, p. 439).

These views share a common ground in that, as Davis (2011) points out, they show how aspects of societal life become integrated in institutional market mechanisms and part of a wider network of market relations and financial exchanges as a result of commercialisation. The border between the "roles as public, neighborly citizens and as privatized, competitive consumers" (Davis, 2011, p. 211) therefore becomes blurred.

One of the prominent features of the different conceptualisations of commercialisation found in these bodies of literature relates to whether it represents a binary or gradual process. While works covering commercialisation on a societal level (Britnell, 1996), sectors of the economy (Bharadwaj, 1985; Mohan, 1991; Plasketes, 1992; Wang & Murie, 1996; Jolly, 1997; ) and consumer awareness of commercialisation related to authenticity (Murray, 2002) suggest this process to be gradual, works taking the perspective of firms (e.g. Lamb et al., 2008; Pride & Ferrell, 2010) instead suggest it to be more binary in nature. Put differently, the idea of

commercialisation representing a decision taking place within firms, even though it encompasses or is embedded in sub-processes, implies that commercialisation is confined within a specific time and place where societal consequences are left out of the scope.

In view of this discussion, another central aspect concerns how commercialisation has been conceptualised relating to the role of consumers. In contrast to the reviewed literature that positions the process of commercialisation within the boundary of firms, works within the field of CCT have shown how consumers are aware, and also react, as different spheres of life become commercialised because of tensions forming as a result of such processes. However, in both interrelated bodies of literature consumers are understood as actors who are excluded from the locus of commercialisation. Instead, consumers are not given agency and an opportunity to react until commercialisation has taken place and thus they are excluded from the process itself.

With respect to the commercial values, it has been argued that consumers are able to create or co-create values (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009) and exert power over brands (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). These arguments challenge the notion of consumers being situated outside of the locus of commercialisation processes. Moreover, it illustrates an incomplete body of knowledge in terms of explaining the role consumers play in these settings.

The object of commercialisation does not necessarily comprise products and services to be marketed using traditional marketing terminology (e.g. Armstrong & Kotler, 2008; Kotler et al., 2008), but can go beyond these concepts to include a wide array of consumption objects, institutions and social practices (e.g. Sassatelli, 2000, 2010). In view of how institutions and social practices have been explained in relation to places as being lived, practised and inhabited spaces (Malpas, 1999; Soja, 1989, 1999), a similar approach has been suggested in the setting of fashion studies. Kawamura treated the concept of fashion in terms of constituting “a system of institutions, that produces the concept as well as the phenomenon/practice of fashion” (2005, p. 1). Relating to this view, institutions were suggested to emerge as a result of “social practices that are regularly and continuously repeated, are sanctioned and maintained by social norms, and have a major significance in the social structure” (Kawamura, 2005, p. 107).

Traditional practices in the fashion industry have begun to be challenged in light of novel practices emerging in social media. In the case of the fashion blogosphere, different forms of practices related to self-brand associations, fashion brands as objects of desire, and practices that embed brands as identity construction partners have emerged (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).

These practices could have an impact on extant practices involving marketing of brands, fashion and style, as well as the fashion industry itself (cf. Kawamura 2005; Rickman & Cosenza, 2007).

The reviewed works provide conceptual approaches to the notion of commercialisation and suggest that institutions and social practices represent central components in commercialisation processes. More specifically, the emphasised role played by institutions and social practices materialising in novel spaces provides a helpful approach to the spatial settings of social media in terms of fashion blogs and blogospheres. In the next section, the discussed bodies of literature are brought together and the research questions this dissertation seeks to answer are derived.

## Social media and the transformation of spaces into commercial places

In regard to the reviewed bodies of literature, social media space can be regarded to manifest an emergent landscape of places that are undergoing a population process. This view suggests that places forming in this landscape could be characterised by fluid relationships. As social media are characterised by a high degree of interaction, these interactions and the resulting relationships can be considered to function as the basis for meaning creation that becomes shared and embedded in social practices.

Social practices in social media have been shown to relate to dimensions such as social networking, impression management and community engagement (cf. Turkle, 1997; Schau et al., 2009) but also practices manifesting commercial features such as brand use and vigilante marketing (cf. Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Schau et al., 2009). Early studies of places being formed in social media space have been shown to be characterised by personal expressions and associated with a high degree of personal creativity in their production (Gunter, 2009). In contrast to these characteristics, places in social media were later shown to materialise both as places where consumers, commercial objects and commercial actors interact (Kim & Jin, 2006; Thomas et al., 2007; also see McCormick & Livett, 2012) and as places where only consumers and commercial objects interact (Muñiz & Schau, 2007).

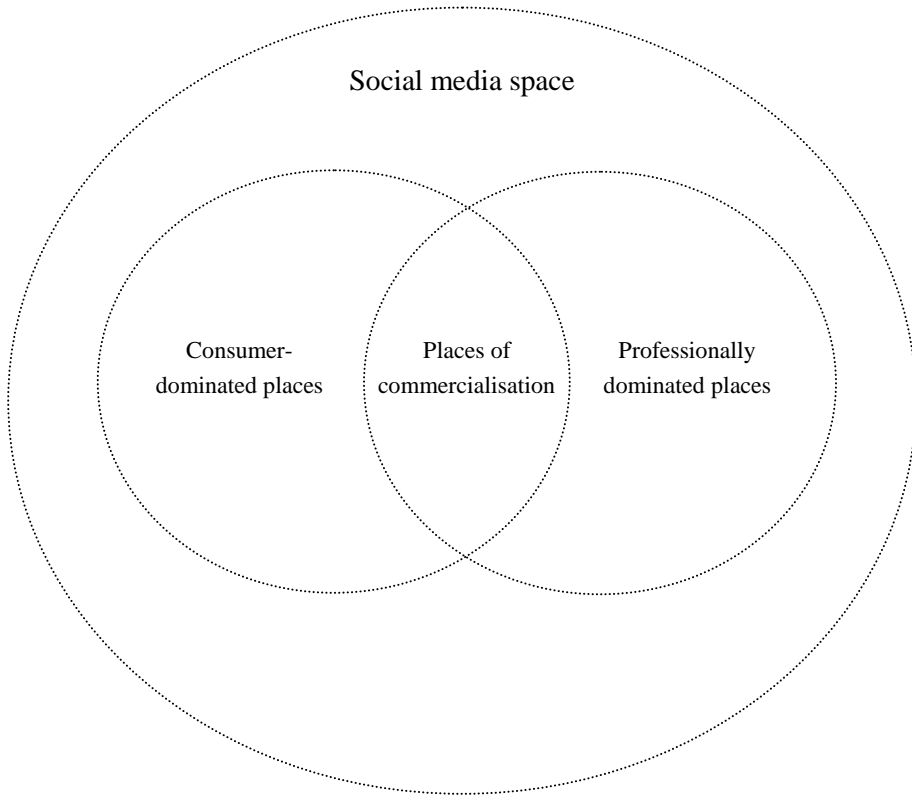
In view of this development, an evolution can be discerned. Initially, places seem to have been dominated by non-commercial and amateur expressions of consumers. For example, blogging practices have been explained as being closely related to the personal and intimate practice of writing diaries

(Keren, 2006). As, over time, these places have become highly interconnected, the collective places of blogospheres have been suggested to represent a “densely interconnected conversation” that emanates from these personal characteristics (Herring et al., 2005, p. 1). Places in social media have also given rise to digital communities where linking value has been created based on branded goods or services and through collective practices integrating commercial objects (e.g. Schau et al., 2009). Parallel to this development, commercial actors have also inhabited social media space by creating places of their own with the aim of managing and controlling the creation of meanings concerning commercial objects through practices fostered in these places (e.g. Kim & Jin, 2006). Taken together, the landscape of social media space has, through the process of becoming inhabited, given rise to places where different groups of inhabitants seem to dominate the development of meanings and practices. An attempt to graphically represent the result of this evolution is found in Figure 1.

As illustrated in the literature, the prevalence of brand-centred communications and communities of inhabitants that collectively participate in activities involving commercial objects seems to increasingly characterise social media (cf. Berthon et al., 2008; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). As practices embedding brands are carried out, they also encompass the creation or co-creation of value (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). The arguments raised by Muñiz & Schau (2007; cf. Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), that not only can consumers engage in processes of co-creating meaning, but they can independently author the meanings of brands (cf. Hatch & Schultz, 2010), illustrates how places in social media space seem to encompass a dynamic interplay in terms of how value is created (cf. Fyrberg Yngfalk, 2011). What is absent in the literature, however, are explanations of how and why values created in these spatial settings become appropriated and by whom. In view of this discussion, a first research question is drawn that is answered in Paper I.

Research question 1: How and why is value created and appropriated in the spatial settings of social media?

The extant literature has argued that the formation of brand communities takes place through linking value related to branded consumption objects (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). This perspective has become criticised and instead it has been suggested that communities can emerge based on combinations of consumption objects (Ostberg, 2007). As previously discussed, the idea of constellations of brands (Solomon & Assael, 1987) suggests that not only marketers but also consumers have the ability to associate and combine brands through use and experience.



**Figure 1.** Landscape of dominant places in the social media space.

One setting in which these constellations seems especially prevalent is the fashion industry (Englis & Solomon, 1994), where combined consumption objects materialise in close connection to the interrelated concepts of fashion and style (cf. Clarke, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; Kawamura, 2005). In view of this observation regarding the literature, no direct attempt has been made to explain how combined consumption objects can create linking value in the spatial settings of places emerging in social media. Therefore, the second research question, answered in Paper II, is formulated as:

Research question 2: How and why do consumers inhabiting places in social media space organise around combinations of consumption objects?

Keeping in mind previous observations concerning the blurring border between consumers and professionals, the reviewed literature illustrates that borderlands seem to be increasingly prevalent where meanings and practices become both shared and contested (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). In the social media space, these borderland places seem to have undergone an evolution, becoming increasingly commercialised (cf. Gunter, 2009; Kretz & de Valck,

2010). Previous literature has suggested that places are dominated by their inhabitants through the iteration of social practices (Cresswell, 2004, cf. Seamon, 1980; Thrift, 1996, 1997). Therefore, different places can become dominated by their different inhabitants, such as consumers and commercial actors. In view of this discussion, extant literature lacks contributions that explain the interplay between inherently social places and places that encompass commercial logics. In view of the emergence of professionally dominated places in social media space, which have been created with the rationale of fostering practices that benefit commercial interests, explanations of how these places affect consumer practices and consumer-dominated places are also absent. Furthermore, consumer practices that result in the creation of user-generated content have been suggested to be understood as free from professional routines, professional practices and the context of commercial markets (cf. Kaplan & Haenli, 2010; OECD, 2007). This consequently becomes challenged in places inhabited by both consumers and commercial actors, where practices can potentially be subjected to commercialisation. Based on this discussion, the third research question that is answered in Paper III is formulated as:

Research question 3: How and why are consumers and professionals interacting within places of commercialisation in the spatial settings of social media?

As the literature review has shown, the spatial dimension of social media has offered dynamic places for users' self-representation and expressions of identity. More specifically, this dynamic nature has been suggested to materialise as the ability, prior to taking action, to examine, reflect, manipulate, and try different actions before choosing the most suitable alternative (cf. Berg, 2011, Turkle, 1997). Thus social interaction taking place in these digital places has been understood as materialising differently than in offline contexts. Drawing on the works by Tuan, the interplay between self-representation, identity and social interaction of individuals is also related to, and has consequences for, the identity of place (1977).

In the fashion industry setting, identity and self-image have been suggested to be highly related to fashion consumption, where consumers seek to project conceptions of identity through consumption (cf. Giddens, 1991; Kawamura, 2005; Turkle, 1997). This interplay has, furthermore, become fuelled by the rise of the cool-hunting industry, where struggles for identity are increasingly present as it potentially threatens the value of consumers' identity projects (cf. Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Kjeldgaard, 2009). In places in the social media space, these struggles have to do with individuals and their identity and self-representation efforts, but they also have consequences for the collective places' identity. As social media space is characterised by



places highly related to personal creativity and ownership, as in the case of blogs (Gunter, 2009) that together represent a densely interconnected conversation (Herring et al., 2005), this also adds to the need for a critical examination and explanation of individuals' identity and self-representation efforts in places undergoing commercialisation, where more knowledge is needed in view of extant literature. Therefore, the fourth research question that is answered in Paper IV is formulated as:

Research question 4: How and why does interaction between consumers and professionals in places in social media space affect users' articulation of identity and self-representation?

The four research questions drawn from extant literature, in view of the aim of this dissertation, together enable an exploration of specific commercial traits and conditions that characterise social media. They also enable the exploration of how processes of commercialisation taking place in these spheres can be explained.

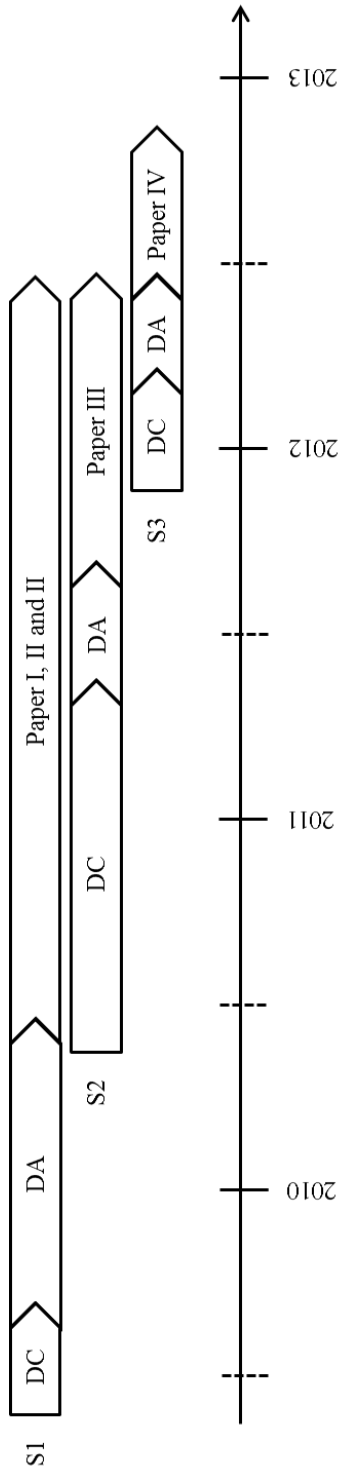


## 3. Method

This chapter presents the research design and applied methods that have been used in approaching the aforementioned research questions. The first section presents an overview of the three conducted studies which, together, form the empirical foundation of this dissertation. The following sections present each study in further detail, covering applied procedures for sample selection, data collection and analysis. At the end of this chapter, the validity and reliability are discussed together with a note on the research process.

### Overview of research design

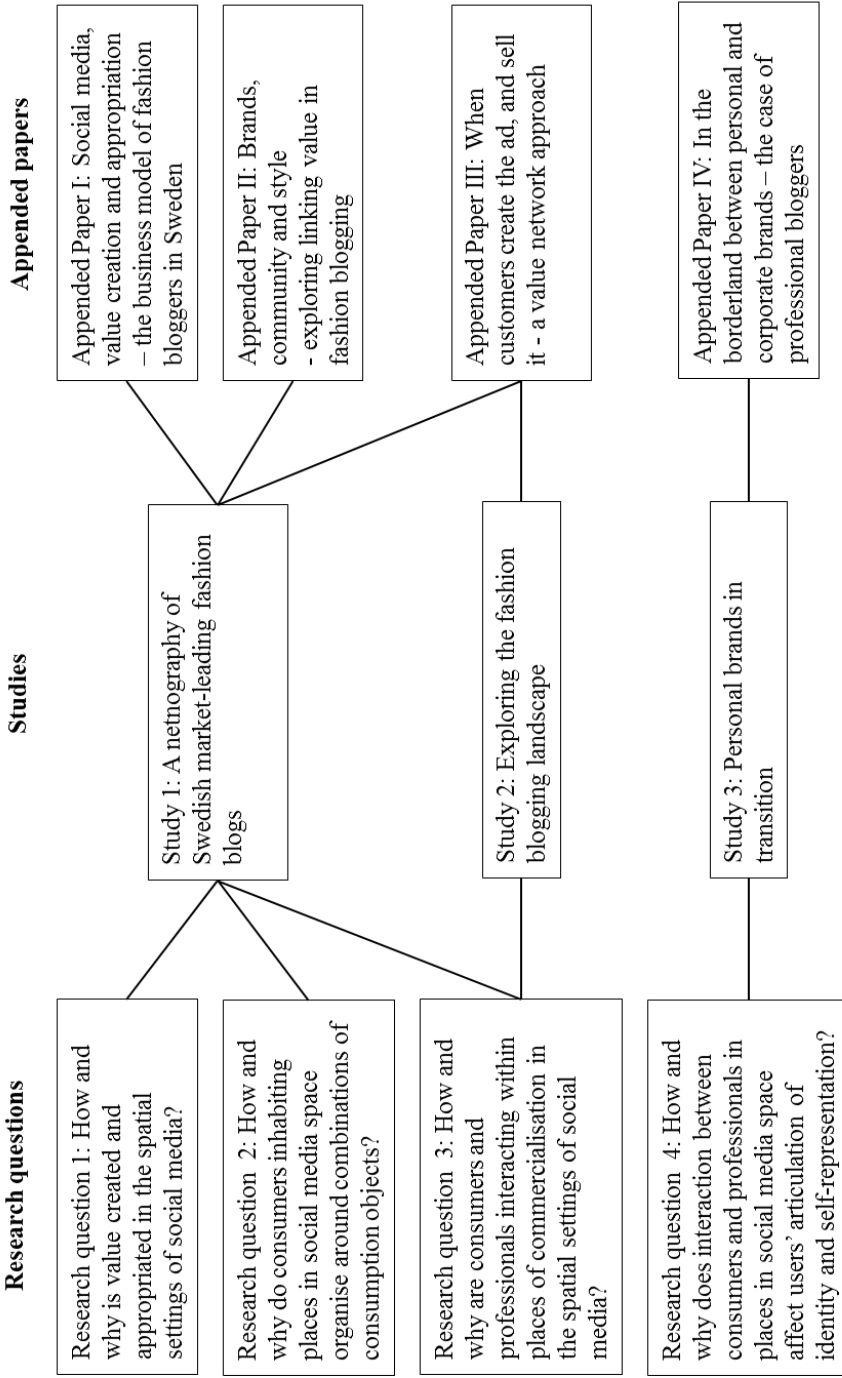
The research design of this dissertation covers three studies that were conducted in three subsequent stages. Figure 2 presents a timeline over the three conducted studies that also includes an illustration of periods of data collection, data analysis and writing up the studies' associated papers. Table 2 presents an overview of the three studies and their individual objectives, units of analysis, research design, methods used for data collection and analysis, the scope of material included, and the associated papers that were later produced. Figure 3 presents an overview of how the formulated research questions, conducted studies and appended papers correspond to one another. In the following three sections, the individual studies are presented and discussed in further detail.



**Figure 2.** Timeline of conducted studies. (S = Study, DC = Data collection, DA = Data analysis)

**Table 2.** Overview of the studies conducted within the scope of the present dissertation.

	<b>Study 1</b>	<b>Study 2</b>	<b>Study 3</b>
Research objectives	Explore references to fashion brands and fashion e-commerce and private and commercially oriented content published by market-leading fashion bloggers	Explore actors and actor groups' relations in the fashion blogging value network	Explore fashion bloggers' personal brands in the transition from being amateur to increasingly becoming professional
Unit of analysis	Published blog posts	Actors in the fashion blogging value network	Fashion bloggers' personal brands
Research design	Observational netnography	Qualitatively oriented in-depth case study	Qualitatively oriented in-depth multiple case study
Data collection	A combination of procedures drawn from observational netnography, content analysis and social network analysis	Interviews and review of annual financial statements, websites and articles published in the press	Press articles of bloggers' personal names identified through a database of the Swedish printed press
Data material	24 708 blog posts	9 interviews combined with annual financial statements, websites and press articles covering 52 actors	1223 press articles
Data analysis	Qualitative and quantitative content analysis and social network analysis	Mapping of actors and actor groups' relations in the value network	Qualitative content analysis
Time Period	November 2009 – June 2012	May 2010 – June 2012	November 2011 – November 2012
Papers	Papers I, II and III	Paper III	Paper IV



**Figure 3.** Overview of how the formulated research questions, conducted studies and appended papers correspond to one another

## Study 1 – A netnography of Swedish market-leading fashion blogs

To study commercialisation of places found in the spatial settings of the social media, a methodological approach addressing practices and the interplay between places dominated by consumers and professionals was needed. Initial contact with the empirical field of interest was made in the autumn of 2009. Based on observations of the nature of social media relating to commercialisation that was apparently taking place at that time, one specific problem emerged. Neither consumers, seeming to undergo a process of commercialisation, nor commercial actors were regarded as likely to have strong incentives to disclose their professional relationships. In addition, users of social media in the Swedish setting had recently been subjected to audits by the Swedish Consumer Agency. Later in the research process this would continue in terms of audits by the Swedish Tax Agency (see also Chapter 1). The possibilities of obtaining access to trustworthy data by directly contacting consumers or commercial actors therefore seemed relatively problematic. In order to tackle this problem, methodological approaches found in the field of netnography were studied and deemed suitable for the purposes of analysing commercialisation, interaction and novel expressions of marketing practices.

One of the scholars closely associated with the introduction of the netnographic approach is Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2002). Netnography was presented in the late 1990s and depicts how ethnographic research can be conducted in online settings. As the name *netnography* suggests, this approach is inspired by ethnographic methods that can be traced back to techniques used in cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 1998). Netnography allows the researcher to observe or participate in consumer discussions on public websites. One of the main uses of this method is to study consumer behaviour in communities on the web, and it has therefore been suggested to be particularly useful in marketing research (Kozinets, 2002).

A researcher using a netnographic approach must decide whether or not to participate in the communities of interest. One of the more vibrant discussions within the field of netnography relates to this issue, that is, whether a participative or observational approach should be applied when conducting fieldwork. Kozinets argued that the core of netnography, which distinguishes it from gathering and coding qualitative online data, was the use of a participative approach, presenting netnography as an adaptation of “participant-observational ethnographic procedures” (2006, p. 135). Based on this definition, one of the commonly used procedures for conducting netnography has been presented in terms of five different steps that need to be taken into consideration (Kozinets, 2002, pp. 6–16).

These suggested procedures entail participation in studied communities as a fundamental condition. However, participating in communities could give rise to a problematic situation with respect to the potentially sensitive nature of commercial collaborations. Other scholars (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Langer & Beckman, 2005) have suggested how a more observationally oriented netnographic approach could be applied.

Langer and Beckman (2005) suggested how this form of netnography could be used to conduct covert research on sensitive research topics, for example, in a study of consumers discussing cosmetic surgery. They suggested that the procedures presented by Kozinets (2002), and in particular aspects related to ethics, needed to be revised. They also argued that the possibility of integrating related methods, for example, quantitative content analysis, needed to be emphasised as the collected data, in the majority of cases, consisted of written communication. Here, quantitatively and qualitatively oriented results of content analysis should not be regarded as mutually exclusive, but instead should be seen as providing richer descriptions of studied communities.

With regard to the aspect of member check, Langer and Beckman (2005) in their empirical work experienced great difficulty in recruiting informants within a digital community of interest. Therefore, they decided not to inform the members of their presence, and no member check was consequently conducted. From their perspective, it would not have been possible to obtain access to a rich source of empirical material without taking this measure, and thus a covert approach was necessary. Their main argument for why this approach satisfied ethical standards was drawn from research ethics existing within media and communication studies, where content analysis is widely used and accepted. In comparing the study of their chosen community with studies of newspaper readers' letters, they found the procedure of informing and asking authors for permission to use the material an unusual practice. Another argument was that the disclosure of their presence would weaken the aspect of unobtrusiveness. Additionally, the whole project could be endangered if the members opposed the project or engaged in "the spiral of silence" (see for example Noelle-Neuman, 1984).

Based on the revision suggested by Langer and Beckman (2005), Beaven and Laws (2007) argued that one of the main reasons for not disclosing their presence, or asking the community members for their consent, related to the lack of consensus regarding the public or private nature of communities which still needed to emerge. Their main argument pointed to the increased normalisation of digital communication since Kozinets' (2002) introduction of procedures for conducting netnography. They argued that digital



communities should be considered to be of a public nature, thus making consent unnecessary when approaching public posting. In addition, the members of the community that Beaven and Laws (2007) used in their fieldwork had the option to be anonymous or could choose to reveal information about their identity, such as gender, age, occupation and geographical location. Based on these arguments, Beaven and Laws (2007) implemented a revised sequential procedure that consisted of (1) identifying a data set, (2) a period of immersion in the material in order to become familiar with it, (3) conducting a qualitative textual analysis in order to develop a narrative, (4) conducting the quantitative analysis of posts to determine typologies and the orientation of the community, and (5) conducting an extreme case analysis in order to identify the boundaries of the discussion within the community.

Other examples of studies using an observational netnographic approach have focused on website connectedness (Maulana & Eckhardt, 2007), digital communities focusing on cars as consumption objects (Hewer & Brownlie, 2007), and activities related to user innovation in sports footwear (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007). Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the field of netnography has not achieved consensus regarding this issue but that, instead, both approaches have become increasingly used and accepted. As expressed by Kozinets (2010, see also Kozinets, 2006), there is a spectrum of participative and observational fieldwork approaches that are regularly negotiated.

When approaching places in social media space where processes of commercialisation could be discerned, several similarities were found relating to both to the descriptions and to arguments presented by Langer and Beckman (2005) and Beaven and Laws (2007). In the majority of cases, users exhibited a relatively strong tendency to reveal information about their identity and often presented personal and private accounts of their everyday lives. Thus, the revised procedures presented by Beaven and Laws (2007) were chosen for the present study because they offered a more suitable approach to analysing processes of commercialisation without the risk of prompting changes within the communities.

To capture a rich description of aspects of interest, the observational netnography needed to include methodological tools to systemically analyse interactions between bloggers themselves, and between bloggers and commercial actors. Therefore, the methods of content analysis and social network analysis were integrated in the research design to enable a richer analysis of these relationships.

In contrast to how content analysis has been discussed within the context of netnography, social network analysis has not encountered the same critique. Instead, the two methods of netnography and social network analysis have been suggested to be relatively interrelated. Kozinets (2010) argued that social network analysis could function as a point of departure in terms of positioning a network within the boundaries of its scope. Furthermore, it could facilitate the identification of appropriate nodes, for example, individual members, activities, messages, and groups.

Social network analysis offers many possibilities in terms of understanding how actors form networks with different purposes and goals. This method also features several common denominators vis-à-vis the proposed procedures for content analysis. In relation to how Knoke and Yang (2008) described the way in which decisions regarding sampling units, relational forms and content, and level of analysis need to be made prior to data collection, the sequential steps for applying content analysis, as presented by Silverman (2006), have several similarities.

Consequently, the first stage of this study was carried out by using the specified requirements and procedures for applying social network analysis (Knoke & Yang, 2008) and content analysis (Silverman, 2006), combined with the procedures for conducting observational netnography (Beaven & Laws, 2007; cf. Kozinets, 2010). In the next sections, the applied steps and procedures of this study is presented and discussed.

### Sampling places and defining a time period

In identifying communities that would be suitable to study using a netnographic approach, it has been suggested that they be evaluated based on their: (1) relevance in terms of the formulated purpose and research question, (2) level of activity in terms of recent and regular updates, (3) showing a high degree of interaction between participants, (4) having reached a substantial degree of communication, (5) heterogeneity in terms of participants, and (6) ability to provide data-rich, detailed, and descriptively rich material (Kozinets, 2010).

Using these suggested criteria, an initial exploration of places in social media space was carried out. When approaching the relatively large number of places that are present in social media space, two additional criteria were established in view of the purpose of the present dissertation. The sampled places needed to incorporate commercial features and also be influential places in social media space. In this setting, the numbers of users that had been attracted to particular places functioned as a proxy for influence. The main argument for choosing to study popular places in social media space,

instead of medium-sized or small ones in terms of numbers of participants, was that these places were assumed to have been present in social media space for a longer period. Therefore, these places were also assumed to have had better opportunities to generate knowledge about aspects relating to commercial values.

The blogosphere was used as the point of departure to identify places that fulfilled these criteria. It was chosen as the spatial landscape of interest because it represented a particularly influential place that had become highly popular in the Swedish social media space. Another argument was that the Swedish blogosphere also represented a place where a process of commercialisation seemed to be taking place (see also Chapter 1). Therefore, a handful of blog-ranking and blog-listing services were explored. These services operate using the same basic principles. First and foremost, these services offer bloggers different types of statistical tools for measuring blog visits. The process of connecting blogs to these listing services consists of three steps. In the first step, bloggers wishing to gain access to the statistical tools on offer need to register their blogs on the website of the blog ranking services. Here, information about the name of the blog, who owns and writes it, when it was started, and which topics are discussed is entered into a registration form. Once this is completed, in the second step the blogger gains access to an individual code that he/she needs to integrate into the index page of the blog in order to get the statistical services to function. In the third and final step, the blog service software starts compiling data.

When these services were being explored, in the autumn of 2009, one of them dominated the market for this type of service. The blog-ranking portal Bloggportalen (the Blog Portal) had attracted a significantly larger number of bloggers compared to its competitors. Another aspect that distinguished this portal was that it was owned and operated by the same company that operates one of Sweden's largest newspapers, Aftonbladet. For these reasons, this blog ranking service was chosen as a point of departure when sampling individual bloggers. Two important aspects that need to be highlighted in the process of registering a blog on these portals concern the independently measured data and active participation from the blogger's perspective. The first aspect concerns independently measured data that is offered and publicly posted by the blog ranking services, which enabled the identification of market-leading bloggers from an independent party that had no obvious incentive to distort visit statistics. The second aspect related to the fact that the individual bloggers who chose to use these services had themselves defined what they were blogging about.

Using the listing services on Bloggportalen, it became clear that fashion blogs dominated the list of most popular blogs. Therefore, a list that showed

the hundred most visited fashion blogs, many of which were among the most popular blogs in all categories, were further explored. When studying this list, it became obvious that some of the fashion blogs were operated by several bloggers or in some cases were more similar to web magazines. In these cases, where it was problematic to identify who was operating the blog and whether or not it could even be considered to fit the definition of a blog (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2004; Gunter, 2009; Shen & Chiou, 2009), the places were excluded.

This resulted in an initial sample consisting of 62 fashion blogs. In order to understand the fundamental aspects of these blogs, they were reviewed on the basis of: (1) who owned and operated the individual blog, (2) what technical platforms they were using, (3) whether or not the blog was being operated through a registered company, and (4) whether or not collaborations between the sampled blogs could be identified.

Before conducting a pilot study, the issue of defining a time period to analyse remained. Two main alternatives were developed. The first alternative consisted of reviewing a number of months per year on the sampled fashion blogs in order to collect data of a more longitudinal character. The second alternative was to review the year 2009. Because some of the sampled blogs had been started relatively recently, the first alternative was problematic due to the issue of comparability. Therefore, the second alternative was chosen.

### Defining level of analysis

In view of commonly used procedures for content analysis (Silverman, 2006), the following stage consisted of defining the level of analysis in terms of data and measurements. Two major interrelated measurements were developed to analyse what the sampled fashion bloggers primarily produce online, namely blog posts.

The first measurement concerned references to consumption objects in terms of fashion brands and fashion e-commerce published in blog posts. For this study, fashion brands were defined as “brands specialising in apparel, shoes, or accessories”. Fashion e-commerce was defined as “online retailers specialising in fashion products in terms of apparel, shoes or accessories”. Thus, fashion e-commerce in this study was defined as retailers of fashion, not the actual owners and managers of fashion brands. When a blog post contained a reference to fashion brands or fashion e-commerce, the name was registered together with the number of times references were made.

The second measurement, closely related to the first, was constructed to capture how fashion brands and fashion e-commerce references were integrated by bloggers in personal and private narratives published in blog posts. This was analysed by categorising blog posts in one of the following three ways: (1) blog posts that did not contain references to fashion brands or fashion e-commerce, referred to as private posts, (2) blog posts that contained commercial references to fashion brands and fashion e-commerce but simultaneously included a private context, referenced as posts referring to brands, (3) blog posts that did not contain a private context but only references to fashion brands or references to fashion e-commerce, referred to as advertisement posts. A blog post was considered to include private content when it included narratives about a blogger's everyday life, such as writing about school, pets, boyfriends or girlfriends, family vacation plans, etc. Thus, in blog posts that contained commercial references but also private material, the commercial references in these cases became integrated into these personal and private narratives.

Prior to conducting a pilot study, defining relational forms within the framework of social network analysis remained as the final stage. Knoke and Kuklinski (1982, see also Knoke & Yang, 2008) have reviewed different types of network relations, in terms of their content, that have been used in order to study, map and analyse networks in previous studies. In view of these, a third measurement was constructed to explore two-way relations between the sampled fashion bloggers. Blog posts consisting of references to other fashion blogs included in the sample were reviewed using a measurement that could adopt three values based on the feelings expressed about the mentioned blog: (1) positive, (2) neutral, or (3) negative. This measurement aimed to capture a combination of communication relations and sentiment relations (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982) expressed between the sampled bloggers. Using this measurement, the connectivity between individual fashion bloggers could be systematically analysed for indications of collaborative and competitive behaviour – thereby functioning as a proxy and indicator of commercialisation taking place between bloggers themselves.

## Conducting a pilot study and proceeding to data collection

In order to see whether the constructed research design and its associated measurements functioned as expected or needed to be revised, a pilot study was conducted in September 2009. Five fashion blogs were studied, whereby three months in 2009 were reviewed in each blog on the basis of the three measurements described above. This review was conducted by downloading

the sampled material, reading it and coding it according to the constructed measurements with the help of Excel.

The pilot study gave clear indications of two important aspects that needed to be dealt with before engaging in future data collection for the main study. The first aspect concerned abbreviations of fashion brands found in a number of reviewed blog posts. It showed the need for a clearer definition of how and when fashion bloggers were understood to refer to fashion brands and fashion e-commerce. In cases where it was evident which fashion brand or fashion e-commerce actor was intended (e.g. the abbreviation LV for Louis Vuitton), the reference was registered. When different types of nicknames were used which did not explicitly refer to particular brands, the references were not registered. This was done based on the argument that only references clearly referring to a certain fashion brand or fashion e-commerce actor could enable the generation of commercial value.

The second aspect concerned the amount of time needed to review each month's worth of blog posts. It became obvious that there was too little time to review the initial sample of 62 blogs, and the number of blogs to be studied was reduced to 20; these were the 20 largest blogs in terms of readership numbers.

Between November 2009 and February 2010, the main review was conducted of all blog posts published during 2009 in the sampled blogs. The review was carried out with the help of the revised procedures as described in the previous section. Thus, it was conducted with the help of coding schemes designed in Excel in which each individual blog was given a separate file. All individual blog posts were assigned a registration number based on the individual blogs, sorted by month. In parallel with the use of coding schemes in Excel, Word documents for each individual fashion blog were used in order to copy blog posts that were of particular interest with respect to the aim and research questions of this dissertation. During the data collection period, it became obvious that technical difficulties had arisen with two of the sampled blogs, resulting in the deletion of large parts of their blog post archives. These two blogs were removed from the sample, reducing the final sample to 18 blogs. Table 3 presents further details about the sampled bloggers.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of the sampled fashion bloggers.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Age*</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Visits per week**</b>	<b>Operation time (months)*</b>	<b>Registered companies</b>	<b>Number of blog posts</b>
1	19	Female	642,182	60	Yes	1,539
2	18	Female	641,989	48	Yes	1,842
3	18	Female	586,629	36	No	1,826
4	19	Male	211,256	22	No	2,939
5	22	Female	206,263	36	No	1,057
6	18	Female	172,307	24	Yes	1,500
7	27	Female	153,509	24	Yes	1,032
8	15	Female	149,565	24	No	2,850
9	31	Female	144,67	24	Yes	1,269
10	30	Female	92,732	22	Yes	1,153
11	36	Female	79,74	24	Yes	987
12	25	Male	75,877	24	Yes	840
13	16	Female	74,262	48	No	376
14	25	Female	70,761	60	Yes	593
15	35	Female	61,211	24	Yes	688
16	29	Female	61,045	60	No	1,300
17	20	Female	58,091	36	Yes	1,035
18	27	Female	55,349	48	No	1,882

\*In January 2010 \*\*In August 2009

### Analysing the collected data

Once data collection had been completed, analysis began, focusing first on the studied fashion bloggers. Individual characteristics drawn from the data were mapped in order to find groups exhibiting similar traits. Once a number of thematic fashion blogger groups had been identified on the basis of their fundamental characteristics, data relating to fashion brands, fashion e-commerce, commercial and private contexts was analysed.

In the next step, content analysis was applied following the constructed measurements in order to explore commercial contexts in the studied blogs. This was done by taking the data sets from individual fashion blogs and compiling and importing the data into the statistics program SPSS. SPSS was used to perform different sets of statistical analyses on the individual blogs, the identified thematic groups, and the accumulated sample. In parallel, social network analysis was applied using UCINET to analyse relational forms and then map these in sociograms.

When the statistical and social network analyses had been carried out, field note data was analysed in order to find thematic characteristics emerging in the material. This was done by analysing each individual blog's associated field note data, followed by an analysis on the level of the identified thematic groups and lastly the aggregated data material. When these analyses had been completed, the material was analysed once again, using emergent themes as the point of departure. This resulted in the identification of how community was expressed in blogs, and also the identification of activities that were commonly used in the studied blog posts, such as remarks about today's outfit, question-and-answer sessions and competitions (which often integrated a commercial context in the way they were presented).

In the final step, data analysis that aimed to track various expressions of style was conducted to find collective articulations in the sampled blogs. Because of the elusive nature of the concept of style, an approach with a structured set of procedures was developed and applied in three sequential steps in order to operationalise this concept.

Expressions of style were approached by using the aggregated number of references to fashion brands published in the sampled blogs as a proxy. The styles favoured by each individual blogger were thereby identified based on the fashion brands they mentioned and the frequency of these references. To determine whether a brand played an important role in a blogger's individual style, the number of references to a specific fashion brand was divided by the total number of references to fashion brands in 2009 found for each individual blogger. This provided a measure of the proportion of references to a particular brand out of the total number of fashion references found on each particular blog, and thereby provided an indicator of the role individual brands played in individual bloggers' articulations of style.

After the proportion of each fashion brand mentioned on each fashion blog had been calculated, the results were aggregated to determine whether collective forms of style could be discerned. To identify which brands played a significant role in each blogger's articulation of style, fashion brands that were, proportionately, mentioned most frequently were sequentially aggregated for each blog until the total proportion reached 75 per cent. When this analysis was completed on all sampled blogs, three style categories were defined based on the number of brands that, together, constituted 75 per cent of all brand mentions. The span for the first style set was defined as between one and five fashion brands, the second style set was defined as between six and ten, and the third as eleven or more.



Further descriptions of how methods employed for each of the three papers (Paper, I, II, III) drawing from this study can be found in the method sections in each of the appended papers.

## Study 2 – Exploring the fashion blogging landscape

In the first study of this dissertation, the analysed data focused on posts published in market-leading fashion blogs. As the analysis of the empirical material of this study approached completion, there were strong indications in the collected and analysed field note data that the studied fashion bloggers took part in commercial collaborations and were part of an associated value network. In order to further explore how the sampled fashion bloggers cooperated with commercial actors, and to explore commercial values within this wider setting, a second study was developed with the purpose of analysing and mapping actors embedded in this spatial landscape.

In order to get an overview of the actors potentially involved, field note data collected in the first study was reviewed a second time. This was done with the intention of mapping actors that bloggers, both explicitly and implicitly, identified as part of their own or other bloggers' operations. Based on this review, three categories of key actor groups were identified: (1) other fashion blogs, (2) blog platforms, and (3) advertisement firms. Blog platforms consisted of firms offering websites, or technical platforms, where Internet users could register and post blogs. Advertisement firms specialised in collecting, providing and selling online advertising space to potential advertisers, often through affiliate marketing programs. Based on this analysis, 26 actors were identified in the two latter actor groups respectively.

In view of the fact that this review confirmed the presence of both commercial actors and actor groups, additional data was collected regarding these actors by studying websites, annual reports and press articles. Based on data collected up to this point, a preliminary mapping of the value network including the three actor groups was conducted. In order to confirm the preliminary map of the identified value network, and to understand individual actors' operations, interviews were conducted with nine representatives from blog platform firms and advertising firms (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Overview of conducted interviews.

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Actor group</b>	<b>Date</b>
CEO	Blog platforms	15th June 2010
CEO	Blog platforms	18th August 2010
Founder	Blog platforms	18th August 2010
Founder	Blog platforms	18th August 2010
Founder	Blog platforms	19th August 2010
CEO	Blog platforms	20th August 2010
Editor	Blog platforms	5th May 2011
Founder	Advertisement firms	15th June 2010
CEO	Advertisement firms	6th May 2011

The interviews focused on the firms' operations, reasons they had emerged and commercial collaborations they had developed with other actors within the value network. The proportion of interviews conducted with respondents representing blog platforms was significantly higher compared with advertising representatives. The reason for focusing on actors within this group was the assumption that they functioned as the link between fashion bloggers and advertisement firms. Therefore, they were assumed to be able to give their views not only regarding their own operations but also their views of other identified actor groups. This group was assumed to work most closely with the sampled fashion bloggers.

The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide that combined semi-structured and open-ended questions. The interviews took place in May and June 2010 and in May 2011. They were conducted by telephone because of the respondents' wide geographical spread. They were transcribed in part shortly after the interviews with the particular aim of securing an account of all mentioned network relations. Based on this data, which made it possible to triangulate, the value network was amended to provide an accurate overview of individual actors and actor groups, and the structure of the value network itself. Additional descriptions of the methods employed can be found in the associated and appended paper's (Paper III) method section.

### Study 3 – Personal brands in transition

The findings generated in the first and second studies in this dissertation provide in-depth descriptions of individual actors and also the spatial landscape in which they took part. In regard to these findings, three of fashion bloggers were identified as having exhibited a relatively high degree

of commercial and entrepreneurial activity. In order to further understand these activities, data was drawn from: (1) the netnographic study, (2) public databases disclosing the number of businesses in which the individual bloggers had an ownership interest, and (3) public databases disclosing the turnovers of their respective businesses. In all three cases, individual bloggers operated their blogs through registered companies. They also distinguished themselves by expanding their entrepreneurial activities beyond the boundaries of their blogs. They did this by starting businesses related to their blogs and by taking part in a wide array of commercial collaborations. In view of these findings, and to further understand how these three individual actors operated, a third study was developed with the purpose of analysing the development of their personal brands. The rationale for studying this aspect was to analyse whether this group of bloggers were not only commercialising their activities but had in fact reached a point where they could be argued to have become commercial actors themselves.

In view of this discussion, these three individuals were sampled for a third study. By using the initially collected data, as presented in the previous paragraph, the individual bloggers' entrepreneurial activities were traced. This was done by creating timelines that included milestones of each blogger's career, widening the scope from the previously used delimitation of the year 2009. In the following stage, a way was needed to track the bloggers' efforts relating to personal branding as well as their personal brands over time. To capture these aspects, articles published in the Swedish print media were used. This made it possible to collect texts that described the individual bloggers and texts where they were also given an opportunity to present themselves.

Data was collected using the Swedish database Retriever, which offers digital copies of articles from 457 Swedish publications, thereby providing access to a significant proportion of the Swedish print media. Searches for the bloggers' personal names were conducted, resulting in a data set amounting to 2,672 articles (see Table 5).

The data material covered a time period ranging from four to twelve years, with the main concentrations being found between 2008 and 2011. The year 2008 represented a shared starting point for the sampled bloggers. Therefore, articles published in 2008 (n=671) combined with articles published in 2011 (n=552) were chosen as the empirical scope. This was done based on the assumption that the first year (2008) would capture characteristics initially ascribed to the bloggers, and the last year (2011) would provide a contrasting reference point.

**Table 5.** Identified print media articles including the sampled fashion bloggers found in the Retriever database.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Blogger 1</b>	<b>Blogger 2</b>	<b>Blogger 3</b>
2011	223	240	89
2010	550	211	55
2009	315	236	42
2008	298	337	36
2007	30	1	
2006	4		
2005	1		
2004	-		
2003	-		
2002	3		
2001	-		
2000	-		
1999	1		
Total	1425	1025	222

After the data had been collected, the articles were read several times with the aim of identifying three aspects: (1) whether an awareness of personal branding was evident among the sampled fashion bloggers, (2) themes in the characteristics being ascribed to the bloggers by the authors of the articles, and (3) themes in the characteristics ascribed by the bloggers to themselves. After reading the material several times with these aspects in mind, three thematic categories were identified: (1) activities, (2) personal attributes and values and (3) the influence of the bloggers. After these thematic categories were identified, the material was analysed in further detail for each blogger individually and for the two sampled years separately. Additional descriptions of the methods employed can be found in the associated and appended paper's (Paper IV) method section.

## Advantages and disadvantages of the applied research design

When reviewing the chosen research design and its associated methods, two aspects need to be taken into account: validity and reliability. Hammersley argued that validity refers to “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers” (Hammersley, cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 289). One approach that is commonly used to secure a high level of validity is to triangulate (Silverman, 2006). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the three studies were designed to interconnect with each

other with the aim of capturing different aspects of the phenomena in question – thereby allowing for triangulation or elements of triangulation.

Within the frame of data collection and analysis of the contents published by fashion bloggers, multiple methods were employed in order to analyse the data material from different standpoints. Findings generated through the use of the applied methods of the first study were subsequently assessed and compared with data and findings generated in the second study focusing on identifying actors and actor groups within the spatial settings of social media. Also in the second study, multiple methods were employed to evaluate whether the generated findings, by using different methods and sources of data, corresponded to similar conclusions. This was also partly the case in the third study as the sampling procedures and initial analysis took their point of departure in the two previously conducted studies.

The second aspect to be considered, reliability, refers to “the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (Hammersley, cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 282). Thus, the term refers to the possibility of replicating a conducted study. In the review of contents published by fashion bloggers, suggested procedures for conducting observational netnography (Beaven & Laws, 2007), content analysis (Silverman, 2006), and social network analysis (Knoke & Yang, 2008) were followed. Moreover, data was collected using a coding scheme that was tested in a pilot study prior to the main review. In the pilot study, obstacles were identified and addressed in order to secure a high level of reliability. When studying actors and actor groups, an interview guide was used. Interviews were recorded and partly transcribed in order to document the relations between the actors. When tracing the personal brands of three bloggers over the years 2008 and 2011, the borders of themes emerging in the material were defined before the final analysis of the material was carried out. In view of these implemented actions, the three studies have been carried out using recommended procedures and measures, with conscious decisions being made to maintain a high level of reliability via the data collection and data analysis process. All three studies, however, include qualitative approaches and therefore elements of interpretation, which should be taken into consideration when assessing reliability of the conducted studies.

In view of this discussion, the initial contact with the field of study suggested that bloggers and representatives of fashion firms would be obvious choices as respondents relating to the aim of the present dissertation. This would have enabled an analysis of how commercialisation and instrumental relations involving professional collaborations in the spatial settings of social media developed over time, from the internal perspectives

of firms and bloggers. As discussed, however, neither firms nor bloggers had strong incentives to disclose whether they were working with each other in a professional capacity. Therefore, the possibility to obtain access to trustworthy data by directly contacting firms and bloggers was initially considered to be relatively problematic. These factors thus provide a background to why the research design presented in this chapter, and particularly the research design of the first study, developed, as it allowed for the analysis of the phenomenon of interest without having access to these respondent groups. The presented research design, encompassing three interconnected but independent studies, enabled unobtrusive access to rich data material to be collected and analysed by applying multiple methods. Furthermore, it allowed for flexibility in terms of figuring out the subsequent steps in the research process.

## 4. Summary of appended papers

This dissertation is based on four papers, appended in full versions. This chapter briefly presents the aim and main findings of each paper. Using these findings as the point of departure, the following chapter offers an analysis that reconnects to the literature review presented in Chapter 2.

### Paper I: Social media, value creation and appropriation – the business model of fashion bloggers in Sweden

This paper aims to explain how bloggers create and capture value while also identifying emerging managerial challenges related to the increased prevalence of blogs. This is done by studying how market-leading fashion bloggers create and appropriate value based on sets of activities to which they devote themselves on their blogs. It illustrates how and why a handful of bloggers have built profitable businesses as a result of these activities.

The paper shows that fashion bloggers differ from traditional marketing channels in the fashion industry in that they publish a combination of private and commercial content. By including private content, fashion bloggers develop a form of customer intimacy. Therefore, fashion bloggers' value-creating activities are argued to be related to reduced search and information costs and reduced uncertainty as consumers search for fashionable products they want and information they can trust.

Mainly through registered companies, and in some cases their employers, the studied bloggers have created revenue streams that are directly connected to the products and advertisements featured on their blogs. The value created through these activities is thus appropriated directly, but bloggers also appropriate values through revenue sources related to their main blogging activities.

Commercial bloggers strike a balance between the creation and appropriation of value. Put differently, if bloggers were completely independent of the products and brands they choose to feature on their blogs, their credibility from their readers' perspective would probably be even higher. Such a scenario would, however, imply that little, or at least less, value can

be captured by the bloggers. If bloggers instead published only commercial blog posts, they would no longer be differentiated from more traditional marketing channels in the fashion industry. Consequently, the value bloggers create would be diminished, thereby reducing the available value that could be appropriated. In conclusion, this paper illustrates why bloggers have become powerful intermediaries between fashion firms and fashion consumers and suggests arguments for why management of the blogosphere potentially manifests an emerging source of competitive advantage from the perspective of firms.

## Paper II: Brands, community and style – exploring linking value in fashion blogging

While the first paper examined the creation and appropriation of value in the setting of fashion blogs, the aim of this paper is to explain how style can function as a linking value in communities centred on brands that emerge within the empirical context of fashion. This is done by studying how fashion bloggers, by combining and assembling fashion brands and products, articulate and express different sets of style and how they and their followers engage in activities connected to these style ideals.

By taking as the point of departure the conceptualisation of brand community (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001), the presented findings in this paper support the criticism of the notion that brand communities are limited to, and focused around, one particular brand. Instead, this paper illustrates how the studied fashion blog community is highly characterised by different sorts of fashion-related information interconnected with widely varied sets of products and brands.

As bloggers present different styles on their blogs, which are later discussed with readers, this activity provides readers with inspiration and guidance regarding fashion. It also allows style, initially the expression of bloggers, to become accessible to a wide audience, thereby transforming bloggers’ individual expressions of style into becoming collective in nature as these become embraced in the wider community.

## Paper III: When customers create the ad, and sell it – a value network approach

This paper aims to explain how vigilante marketers in social media can give rise to commercial collaborations with firms. It studies how fashion bloggers



have become part of a value network emerging in the borderland between fashion firms and fashion consumers, arguing that fashion blogs have created a forum where value is created and co-created between consumers, bloggers and brands. In this setting, bloggers have become conductors of brand-centred conversations between bloggers and consumers and among consumers themselves. Based on these findings, this paper widens the perspective beyond bloggers and their readers (cf. Papers I & II) to instead focus on how bloggers operate in a value network that extends its reach from fashion firms to fashion consumers.

The identified value network is characterised by three actor groups that interact through technological innovations and together co-create a service offering that enables fashion firms to gain access to the forum of brand-centred communications offered by fashion blogs. The fashion bloggers are argued to occupy a central position within the value network, with their blogs representing the focal point at which the process of value co-creation related to brands takes place. The power to co-create brand values is closely related to the ongoing conversations found on the blogs, and this paper presents arguments for why the power balance between fashion firms and fashion bloggers shifts towards the consumer side of the value network as a result. An important argument for why this is the case relates to an identified change in the value network's structure, largely driven by bloggers themselves.

The findings presented in this paper challenge the notion of vigilante marketing (Muñiz & Schau, 2007) as being an independent and unpaid activity. Instead, it presents an illustration of commercialised vigilante marketing and suggests arguments for why the effects of commercialised forms of vigilante marketing on brand meaning represent a highly relevant managerial challenge.

## Paper IV: In the borderland between personal and corporate brands – the case of professional bloggers

This paper aims to explain how personal brands materialise in a process in which individuals engage in entrepreneurial ventures over time. This is done by studying how three fashion bloggers' personal brands developed in a process in which the individuals started out as amateurs and then increasingly engaged in entrepreneurial ventures related to their blogging activities. This paper illustrates that the studied fashion bloggers have been engaged in personal branding efforts throughout their careers, and describes how their

blogging activities have been used as a platform for their personal branding projects.

The study shows that the bloggers' personal characteristics comprise one of the most prominent features of the bloggers' personal brands. These characteristics also exhibit resilience, in that they are prominent features in spite of the individuals' entrepreneurial successes. Put differently, personal characteristics ascribed to the bloggers during their initial forays into the public sphere seem to have been highly incorporated into their personal brands.

In relation to the entrepreneurial careers of the studied bloggers, this paper also addresses how personal brands can transform and increasingly incorporate traits commonly ascribed to corporate brands. With respect to the process of commercialisation that the studied individuals' brands have undergone, this paper presents arguments for how to discern the border between personal and corporate brands.

This paper concludes that personal branding efforts undertaken by individuals operating in entrepreneurial settings could create competitive advantages for them and their businesses. The transition from personal to corporate brands can apparently occur without losing the personal characteristics and traits ascribed to the personal brands in the process. Thus, the brand personalities of personal brands seem to represent a potential source of competitive advantage in entrepreneurial contexts.

## 5. Fashion blogospheres

This chapter aims to reconnect with the four research questions of the present dissertation. The chapter opens with a discussion of the formulated research questions in view of the appended papers' key findings relating to value creation and appropriation in social media, the notion of community of style, commercialisation of consumer-dominated places in social media, and self-representation, identity and personal brands in these spatial settings. The commercialisation of the fashion blogosphere is discussed thereafter by reviewing key findings revealing different aspects related to this process.

### Value creation and appropriation in social media

As extant literature illustrates, social media encompass a wide array of value-creating and co-creating practices often relating to brand-centred communications (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Schau et al., 2009). Consequently, it has been argued that consumers and consumer communities taking part in these practices contribute to brands' social construction (Berthon et al., 2008; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In view of the lack of explanations of how, why and by whom these values created in the spatial settings of social media are appropriated, the first research question that was drawn was formulated as:

Research question 1: How and why is value created and appropriated in the spatial settings of social media?

Based on findings presented in Paper I, fashion bloggers inhabiting the blogosphere publish a combination of private and commercial content. By including private content, they create an intimacy between blogger and reader. The main result generated by value-creating practices that integrate consumption objects such as brands is reduced search and information costs and reduced uncertainty relating to fashion advice from the perspective of blog readers (cf. Kretz & de Valck, 2010). As these practices create value from the perspective of blog readers, they give rise to commercial values from the perspective of firms. As bloggers, over time, have realised the presence of these commercial values, they have created revenue streams with the aim of appropriating these values. This is done both directly, relating to

brands and products that are featured on blogs, and indirectly by taking part in entrepreneurial ventures in which blogs function as the nexus.

Value creation and appropriation from the perspective of fashion bloggers, however, is a matter of striking a balance. If fashion bloggers were completely independent of the commercial objects and firms they chose to integrate on their blogs, their credibility from the perspective of readers would arguably be higher. This, however, implies that little value could be appropriated. If bloggers instead chose to publish only commercial content integrating consumption objects, bloggers would no longer be differentiated from other communication and marketing channels found in the setting of the fashion industry.

Taken together, these findings show that value appropriation is not exclusive to firms in the spatial settings of social media, but also that users as bloggers take part in appropriating value. This adds to extant literature by confirming that social media such as blogs can be a source of cultural capital relating to brand use, and consequently a source of social capital for the inhabitants of social media settings (cf. Bourdieu, [1984] 1993; Chittenden, 2010; Tynan, McKechnie & Chhoun, 2010). As illustrated in Paper 1, however, these two forms of capital can also be transformed into economic capital that becomes appropriated by bloggers. Therefore, these spatial settings do not only provide an opportunity to extract fashion information relating to trend forecasting (Rickman and Cosenza, 2007) nor represent a technical setting where independent and unaffected consumer preferences and demands materialise as consumers filter the abundance of available consumption objects (cf. Kaplan & Haenli, 2010; Kretz & de Valck, 2010; OECD, 2007). Instead, places in the social media landscape exhibit a dynamic interplay between their inhabitants relating to value creation and appropriation – aspects that will be further discussed in the upcoming sections.

## Community of style

Extant literature suggests that formation of a consumer community stems from linking value that can materialise around such objects as branded consumption goods and services (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). However, as this perspective has become criticised and it has been suggested that linking value can emerge based on combinations of consumption objects (Ostberg, 2007), no direct attempt has been made to explain how this manifests itself in places emerging in social media space. Therefore, the second research question was formulated as:

Research question 2: How and why do consumers inhabiting places in social media space organise around combinations of consumption objects?

Based on findings presented in Paper II, fashion bloggers together with their readers constitute forms of community. In the setting of these communities, and in view of the abundance of available consumption objects, style acts as a linking value between community members. By combining and assembling consumption objects mainly drawn from the fashion industry, different sets of style become articulated and expressed through practices common to the aggregated fashion blogosphere.

As these practices materialise on blogs, the presentation of style sets provides readers with inspiration, advice and guidance relating to fashion – resulting in value creation, as depicted in the previous section. Because of the public nature of blogs associated with wide variety of community memberships, however, expressions of style do not seem to be transmitted only from industry settings into the consumer-dominated domains of the social media landscape. On the contrary, these communities illustrate the dynamic nature of style in these spatial settings, which is a subject that is debated, discussed and elaborated. As a result, the ownership of style could be regarded as strongly associated with these consumer-dominated domains, as bloggers and readers together are the judges of appropriate style and also actively advocate styles that facilitate diffusion within the borders of the community.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how style functions as a linking value for community members in these consumer communities and they therefore add to the critique of the concept of brand community (cf. Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Ostberg, 2007). This is because the studied fashion blogs are highly characterised by different sorts of commercial information interconnected with sets of consumption objects. More specifically, the notion of brand communities in the setting of fashion blogs becomes defragmented as brands and products are combined into different style sets and could be argued to represent communities of style. This is because practices materialising in these community settings in social media space are not centred on improving or enhancing the use of a focal brand, but instead brands first seem to become relevant and associated with value when they are assembled and combined. In view of the notion of influential fashion bloggers as opinion leaders (Chittenden, 2010), the presented findings confirm how bloggers use blogs as a space where self-stories concerning fashion consumption unfold. Blogs, however, do not only represent individual places for bloggers’ identity projects. Instead, fashion bloggers should be understood as members of style communities, in which they accompany their readers into the world of fashion and help them acquire knowledge and

perspectives on trends – thereby emphasising the collective interplay in these community settings as reflected in the presented findings.

## Commercialisation of consumer-dominated places in social media

Previous literature has devoted a great deal of attention to the blurring border between consumers and professionals and the emergence of borderlands (Pascu et al., 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The literature has also indicated how a transformation seems to have begun as places dominated by consumers are increasingly encompassing commercial features (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Berthon et al., 2008; Schau et al., 2009). As this represents a paradox, in that consumer practices that result in the creation of user-generated content have been viewed as free from professional routines and practices or the context of commercial markets (cf. OECD, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010), the third research question was formulated as:

Research question 3: How and why are consumers and professionals interacting within places of commercialisation in the spatial settings of social media?

The findings presented in Paper III illustrate how a value network stretching its reach from fashion consumers to fashion firms has emerged within the fashion blogosphere. The identified value network is characterised by three actor groups that together enable fashion firms to gain access to consumer-dominated places in the social media landscape where brand-centred communications take place. As the created commercial values are highly related to the ongoing conversations materialising in the spatial settings of blogs, the findings suggest that the power balance between firms, bloggers and readers thereby shifts towards the consumer side as a result. The presented findings also show that bloggers have taken the initiative to change the value network of which they are a part, thereby showing that this process of commercialisation of consumer-dominated places in social media is dynamic and driven not only by firms but also by bloggers themselves.

Taken together, the findings presented in Paper III challenge the notion that content produced in social media settings such as blogs is necessarily free from professional routines, practices and the context of commercial markets (Kaplan & Haenlien, 2010; OECD, 2007). It also challenges the extent to which consumers independently and unpaid take part in expressions of brand loyalty, as in the case of vigilante marketing (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). This is because the presented findings show that the border between consumer-

dominated domains and professionally dominated domains in the spatial settings of social media seem to merge as commercial values emerge. Put differently, the border between vigilante marketing and expressions of commercialised vigilante marketing might be hard to distinguish because of this development. This is particularly the case if mergers are increasingly present in the social media landscape, where struggles and conflicts relating to value appropriation in the spatial settings of inherently social places and places dominated by professional practices occur.

## Self-representation, identity and personal brands

It has been suggested that digital technology, and perhaps most notably social media, open up extended possibilities for users' self-representation and identity creation (Arsel & Thompson, 2011; Kjeldgaard, 2009; Turkle, 1997). By drawing on the work of Tuan, it can be shown that the interplay between self-representation, identity and social interaction relates not only to individual expressions but also has consequences for the identity of place (1977). In view of the blurring border between consumers and professionals, and borderlands emerging as a result (Pascu et al., 2008; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), the fourth research question aimed to critically examine and explain how places in social media represent places for identity and self-representation within the context of commercialisation, and was formulated as:

Research question 4: How and why does interaction between consumers and professionals in places in social media space affect users' articulation of identity and self-representation?

The findings presented in Paper IV illustrate how bloggers' self-representation and identity related to their personal brands can be explained in a shift where bloggers who started out as amateurs have increasingly taken part in commercial ventures related to their blogging activities. The findings show how bloggers have used the spatial settings of blogs for personal branding projects whereas bloggers' personal characteristics manifest one of the most prominent features of these personal brands. Even though bloggers take part in commercial ventures over time, personal characteristics ascribed to bloggers' personal brands exhibit resilience despite these entrepreneurial activities. As, over time, bloggers' personal brands have also become managed by those other than themselves, the presented findings suggest arguments for why bloggers' identity and self-representation cannot be regarded as purely personal branding efforts. Instead, their brands have been transformed into becoming strongly characterised by traits commonly associated with corporate brands, undertaking, for example, activities such as co-branding of fashion collections.

With regards to the reviewed bodies of literature, the findings add to the understanding of self-representation and identity as these become subjected to processes of commercialisation. In these settings, blogs represent places where consumers role-play different identities that integrate consumption objects mainly drawn from the fashion industry. As this role-play of identities creates commercial values that bloggers also appropriate, this suggests that not only consumption objects but also commercial logics are present in these consumer-dominated places of social media. They also become integrated in self-representation and identity projects as a result of bloggers and firms interacting and collaborating commercially through value networks (cf. Kawamura, 2005; Turkle, 1997).

## Transforming places into commercial places

Within the reviewed bodies of literature, the role of consumers has continuously been revised, and the locus of power has shifted to the benefit of consumers (Berthon et al., 2008; Crane, 1999, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Kawamura, 2005; Merz et al., 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2011; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b). It has been suggested that consumers are able to exert power over firms and brands (Muñiz & Schau, 2007), thereby contributing to the blurring of borders between consumers and firms (Pascu et al., 2008).

In view of this development, the presented findings relating to the role of consumers adds to the understanding of the spatial nature of social media. It illustrates that the borders between consumers and firms are indeed blurred. More importantly, however, it also illustrates that the borders seem to become merged in the blogosphere, as its inhabitants not only participate in collective practices relating to integrating consumption objects, but also as commercial values generated by these practices are appropriated by bloggers themselves. This adds to the understanding of the shifting relationship between consumers and firms as it takes as its point of departure the spatial borderlands where social interaction between these actors and consumption objects takes place.

In view of this discussion, the presented findings challenge the previous understanding of commercialisation both from the perspective of firms as applied in marketing theory (Armstrong & Kotler, 2008; Kotler et al., 2008; Lamb et al., 2008; Pride & Ferrell, 2010) and from a consumer-oriented approach as applied in CCT (Murray, 2002; Plasketes, 1992; Sassatelli, 2000, 2010). In light of the presented findings, this study has illustrated how a process of *co-commercialisation* has materialised as consumer-dominated places and professionally dominated places draw closer to each other. Co-



commercialisation in the spatial settings of social media is characterised as an iterative process that takes place between different places and their inhabitants. Put differently, inhabitants together take part in creating commercial value that they, both as consumers and firms, also appropriate.

Co-commercialisation also seems to encompass a process of gradual evolution. As the findings of the appended papers suggest, the processes of the Swedish fashion blogosphere started as consumers ventured into the social media landscape and created places that also integrated consumption objects such as products and brands. This gave rise to commercial values from the perspective of firms that consequently started to approach consumer-dominated places and also inhabit social media space. Over time, as places in social media became increasingly popular, and as bloggers started to appropriate values that arose from these places, several objects seem to have been subjected to the process of co-commercialisation. These objects include places in the social media landscape, consumption objects that have become integrated into these spatial settings and perhaps most notably bloggers themselves relating to identity and personal brands. Put differently, bloggers who early on integrated brands as a potential way to create cultural capital and social capital (cf. Chittenden, 2010) have not only been able to transform these types of capital into economic capital by appropriating commercial values streaming from blogs, they have also been able to leverage existing brands' cultural capital by integrating these values into personal branding projects. Over time, this process of extracting and morphing values associated with existing brands into personal brands has given rise to strong personal brands, but also the integration between existing brands and personal brands, as in cases of co-branding fashion collection. In view of this discussion and the suggestion that societal life has become integrated into institutional market mechanisms and part of a wider network of market relations as a result of commercialisation (Davis, 2011), the notion of co-commercialisation adds to the understanding of how this integration occurs.



## 6. Fashion (blogo)spheres – depicting a sphereological perspective on social media marketing

The purpose of this chapter is to reconnect with the aim of this dissertation. It begins by depicting the character of blogospheres in general, and fashion blogospheres as spaces for commercialisation in particular, drawing on the theory of spheres. At the end of this chapter, this dissertation's concluding remarks and directions for future research are presented.

### Spheres

Previous literature has explained the notion of the blogosphere as the aggregation of blogs (Keren, 2006) that represent the created and occupied space in the digital media landscape (Baoill, 2004). In light of the fact that the blogosphere has also been suggested to manifest a highly interconnected nexus of conversations (Herring et al., 2005), the presented findings together bring forth a new perspective relating to the spatial nature of social media. The blogosphere exhibits traits traditionally ascribed to communities, but the borders of these communities are blurry. This blurriness occurs because of the low entry barriers to the communities, as they include and allow potential members to freely take part in and negotiate such aspects as rituals, traditions and conventions of the blogosphere. In light of that, the blogosphere is not only a neutral space occupied by blogs in the social media landscape, encompassing networks of instrumental relations being formed and negotiated, but this space has a strong social base, is social in character and exists in a social context. As such, the findings reveal that blogospheres are not mere aggregates, but are characterised by their own unique collective characteristics and traits that are related to a space of co-existence and atmosphere that encompasses intimate relations that, when aggregated, form collective meaning and action. In the following sections, these aspects will be further discussed from the perspective of the characteristic traits of the blogosphere itself.

## Spheres of co-existence

Drawing from the presented findings, blogospheres represent places where interactions occur between varied sets of actors and consumption objects. These interactions give rise to relations that form among bloggers, between bloggers and readers, and between bloggers and commercial actors. These interactions and relations also encompass the integration of consumption objects such as products and brands. The interplay between these actors and associated consumption objects is characterised by the formation and negotiation of fluid relations in the spatial settings of the blogosphere.

In order to explain these characteristic traits relating to co-existence, there is a need for a theoretical approach that takes these aspects into consideration. One way is to draw on Sloterdijk's theory of spheres<sup>1</sup> (1998, 1999, 2004). In this theoretical approach, the concept of the sphere has been defined as:

[t]he interior, disclosed, shared realm, inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming human. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 28).

Even though Sloterdijk has not sought to create a systemic philosophy (Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011), the theory of spheres and its associated concepts can provide a new vocabulary of human co-existence that integrates the idea of spatial embeddedness of the social (Borch, 2010, see also Elden, 2012). As such, the theory of spheres provides a theoretical approach with which to analyse diverse sets of activities and intimate relations that, when aggregated, form collective meaning and action. From this perspective, the realm of the blogosphere relating to its associated borders and ownership becomes a question of its inhabitants. Put differently, the balance between the creation and appropriation of value, and commercial- and personal-oriented contents, can be explained as a result of the actors and consumption objects taking part in these spheres comprising a conjunction of the dichotomy of consumer and producer.

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<sup>1</sup> In Peter Sloterdijk's magnum opus, the *Sphären* -trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004), the theory of spheres was introduced and elaborated. The fundamental question addressed by Sloterdijk (1998, 1999, 2004) has been argued to be "where is man?" (Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011, p. 11). In the trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004), the key concept of spheres was explained to encompass the three interrelated concepts of bubbles, globes and foam that aims to capture spheres emerging in the world according to scale. Currently, the first volume of the *Sphären*-trilogy has been translated into English, whereas the second volume is expected to be released in 2014. Because most of the original work is written in German, second-hand sources have mainly been used that attempt to provide an overview of Sloterdijk's German writings to a non-German-speaking audience.

However, this conjunction is not only a question of the actors and consumption objects, but also the origin of consumption objects and consumption practices. When actors and consumption objects originating from these actors take part in these spheres, this process gives rise to communities where linking value is closely related to making sense of meanings, integrating both non-commercial and commercial aspects. This challenges the idea of separating the consumer and producer domains from each other, because the blogosphere represents a metamorphosis of the two.

## Atmospheres of spheres

As a result of this metamorphosis, the formation of relations through interactions between actors and consumption objects is not the only thing taking place. The results of these negotiated relations also give rise to atmospheres of blogospheres. Sloterdijk (2011) explains the relation between spheres and atmospheres as follows:

Spheres are the original product of human coexistence [...] these atmospheric-symbolic places for humans are dependent on constant renewal. Spheres are air conditioning systems in whose construction and calibration, for those living in real coexistence, it is out of the question not to participate. The symbolic air conditioning of the shared space is the primal production of every society. (Sloterdijk, 2011, p. 46)

As actors and consumption objects co-exist in blogospheres and take part in the construction and renewal of these spheres, this results in negotiations of the atmospheres which are highly related to symbolic meaning creation, where the direction of these developments is not linear. As is the case in the materialisation of spheres, atmospheres are also dependent on the actors and consumption objects that take part in these spatial settings. Put differently, atmospheres emerge as a result of, and are maintained by, the intrinsic interests of actors and the different symbolic meanings carried by consumption objects that become integrated in spheres.

## Micro-spheres in blogospheres

The negotiation of co-existence and associated atmospheres of blogospheres does not take place in or encompass only one sphere, but a plethora of micro-spheres. These types of micro-spheres emerge in several forms, such as among bloggers, between readers and bloggers, and among readers themselves. When aggregated, these spheres materialise as a foam of spheres or as an “agglomerates of bubbles” (Sloterdijk, cited in Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2011, p. 15). Thus, instead of treating the blogosphere as a “mono-spherical container” (Sloterdijk, cited in Borch, 2010, p. 226),

the idea of an aggregated foam of micro-spheres instead becomes a question of:

[m]icro-spheres (couples, households, companies, associations) of different formats that are adjacent to one another like individual bubbles in a mound of foam and are structured one layer over/under the other, without really being accessible to or separable from one another. (Sloterdijk, cited in Borch, 2011, p. 31).

The view of blogospheres as encompassing micro-spheres explains the dynamic nature of symbolic meanings materialising as atmospheres. In order to further depict how these processes materialise in particular parts of blogospheres, the following sections depict the character of the fashion blogosphere.

## Fashion (blog)ospheres

As illustrated in the presented findings, fashion blogospheres are characterised by varied sets of activities and collective actions. These social relations materialise in ways that could be expected based on previously defined typologies of communal relations materialising in the settings of blogs (Kozinets, 2010; Rettberg, 2008). Blogs represent an asynchronous type of communication that combines text, visual imagery and video. Social relations created and maintained on blogs, however, encompass a multifaceted spatial dimension as they materialise in both digital and physical settings. From this perspective, fashion blogs can be understood as spheres encompassing micro-spheres situated in foam within a commercially oriented atmosphere.

## Spheres of interest

Communal interaction within the sphere of blogs is characterised by a strong sense of shared interests. These interests are multifaceted as they materialise and venture into the realm of the personal, private and commercial.

When approaching the published content in the studied fashion blogs, personal interests initially materialise in the form of storytelling from the bloggers' perspective. These stories later become topics of discussion in other communal interactions on the blogs. The bloggers' personal interests, however, are articulated as not only being the interests of bloggers themselves but rather the interests of the collective sphere. This illustrates the paradox of the *personal* in this setting. This notion commonly connotes traits of an individual. In this context, however, the personal interests instead represent the interests of the collective. This feature of spheres also becomes

increasingly prominent as practices such as question-and-answer sessions facilitate communal interaction that engages the interests of the collective.

While personal interests in the blogosphere seem to be collective in nature, the private interests represent a feature that, in contrast, materialises as an individual expression. In this setting, discussions about the bloggers' private lives, relating to their most intimate bubbles of family, such as between parent and child, are common. Such personal expressions suggest that the intimate relations situated in bubbles of the private become transformed to increasingly become a property of the collective. While there is no border separating personal interests in terms of individual and collective expressions, the border separating the private from the public instead of blurring seems to fade as spheres of interest merge with one another.

Relating to the fading boundaries of the private and personal, the spheres that inhabitants populate do not encompass only interests of a non-commercial nature. Instead, commercial objects such as products and brands also populate these spheres. When approaching this issue from the perspective of social interactions articulating collective interests, it also becomes obvious that practices that strengthen the presence of commercial objects have emerged, such as the presentation of today's outfit. This practice manifests the collective interest in style, as articulated with the help of fashion products and fashion brands. In the context of this practice, which encompasses a strong commercially oriented expression, it paradoxically seems to be the interest of the sphere that allows the presence of these commercial features. This is because it helps its inhabitants orientate themselves in relation to the elusive concept of style, and consequently fashion. Put differently, it seems to be the interest of the collective that allows these expressions to become part of the spheres. As a consequence, this sometimes makes it hard to detect the border between the non-commercial and commercial.

## Spheres of attention

Fashion blogospheres give the impression that they are inclusive in nature, appearing to welcome anyone who shares the interests of the spheres to venture in. By setting aside the interests materialising within these spheres, another feature characterising these spheres is how aspects related to attention materialise. Blogs represent communal spheres that can take on strong collective forms, but even so, individual bloggers occupy a central position. Put differently, bloggers have some ability to lead the conversations taking place within their sphere. This also enables bloggers to direct the attention of the sphere to certain topics of interest. This is a common

feature of the blogs, and the origin of topics of discussion seems to emerge both within the sphere itself but also from neighbouring spheres.

In these spheres, ongoing conversations, whether they stem from personal, private or commercial interests, can also emerge around individuals as such. This is one of the more prominent features of the spheres, especially when it concerns bloggers themselves. Bloggers tend to focus attention on each other in both positive and negative terms. Even though the spheres commonly regard themselves as part of one and the same sphere, as can be seen in how community is expressed in the studied spheres, conflicts and struggles also emerge that are often centred around individuals. Paradoxically, it seems that these struggles and conflicts both act as drivers of attention and simultaneously enable blogs as micro-spheres to become more closely integrated with each other. These instances also seem to reveal the borders or the membrane of the wider fashion blogosphere, from the perspective of its own inhabitants as well as the inhabitants of bordering spheres.

Attention focused on individuals also becomes a question of integrity from the perspective of bloggers. In some instances, bloggers express how the sphere of blogs had deprived them of their intimate bubbles, thereby forcing them to renegotiate how they approach these borders under attack. This has led to the creation of false bubbles with fictive inhabitants that also become part of the spheres of blogs. This illustrates that struggles and conflict are not only of concern from the perspective of blogs as spheres; they also compel individuals to find ways to renegotiate and recreate bubbles that come under attack as a result of conflict.

Bloggers do not only act within the spatial dimension of spheres of blogs but also enter and imitate neighbouring spheres. The most prominent example can be found in cases where bloggers have become prominent personalities in traditional forms of media. This illustrates the influence of the spheres that bloggers inhabit, and perhaps especially the influence of individual bloggers themselves. In the spheres of the professional media, bloggers become representatives of the collective spheres of blogs. This thereby transposes the collective dimension of spheres of blogs so that they are more prominently characterised by individual action. This also illustrates that the spheres of blogs have ventured deeper into the foam of the established over the course of its emergence and later development.

### Spheres of power and influence

The ability to act as conductor for collective spheres and bloggers' ability to turn attention to themselves also raises the issue of how spheres' power and influence materialise. Drawing from the characteristics discussed up to this



point, power and influence become a complex matter of the spheres. Because the existence of the spheres is dependent on their inhabitants, this suggests a dual relationship between the collective and the individual. The influence of spheres, in terms of population size and their proximity to other spheres in the surrounding foam, is, in the end, collective in nature. Put differently, inhabitants of blogospheres choose whether or not to take part in particular spheres of interest, or whether or not to migrate to other neighbouring spheres that emerge in the landscape of both the blogosphere and social media in general. However, individual bloggers may choose whether or not to meet the interests of the collective. This implies that bloggers' decisions relating to the interests of the spheres affect the spheres and force them to transform depending on the decisions bloggers choose to make. Taken together, this illustrates an uneven and at the same time reflexive relationship.

It is, however, not only the size dimension of spheres, related to populations sharing common interests, that have to do with power and influence in this setting. As illustrated, micro-spheres of blogospheres have, over time, become increasingly similar to spheres of the commercial. In view of this development, bloggers themselves rather than the collective as a whole have been able to influence the spheres' position vis-à-vis neighbouring commercial spheres. Put differently, bloggers have had the power to regulate both closeness to and also influence over commercial spheres. The reason for this relates to the fact that bloggers have not only agreed to approach these spheres, but have actively taken part in the process of integrating micro-spheres with commercial spheres. Even though bloggers' decisions can potentially cause a response from the collective, individual bloggers have still taken individual actions. This process contrasts with the collective nature of spheres relating to power and influence.

## Spheres of commerce

The previous sections have described the character of spheres and blogospheres. In view of spheres of interest, attention, power and influence, questions arise about how these are integrated with each other and why spheres and atmospheres of spheres change and become increasingly commercialised.

Spheres become populated as their inhabitants share personal, private and commercial interests concerning objects and their meanings that over time become integrated in them. The interests of spheres govern what particular objects can be subjected to the spheres' attention, which as a consequence make the interests of spheres the antecedent of attention. As inhabitants of

blogs as spheres share an uneven relationship concerning influence and power, which are reflexive in nature and embedded in collective action, this also affects how particular objects of interest become subjected to the spheres' attention. As spheres are embedded in foam and thereby surrounded by neighbouring spheres, inhabitants, through the negotiation of interests, also articulate attention concerning evolving interests drawing from both their own and neighbouring spheres. These processes in turn change atmospheres and consequently transform spheres' positions and closeness to other spheres in the setting of the foam.

Drawing on the studied spheres of blogs, the blogosphere was initially characterised by individuals who had ventured out into an uninhabited space to explore the uses and meanings of new technological expressions embedded in social media. Later, the spheres of blogs centred on fashion would become particularly inhabited places in these spatial settings. As the popularity and population of these spheres increased, and because the collective interests centred on fashion and expressions of style became articulated with the help of consumption objects such as fashion products and fashion brands, the spheres of blogs, on their own initiative, created atmospheres that included commercial elements.

As atmospheres characterised by commercial elements emerged, this eventually sparked the attention of commercial spheres situated in close proximity in the foam. As commercial spheres started to approach the emergent spheres of blogs, the spheres of blogs would later start to approach the commercial spheres. As this development took place, other spheres materialising around and between the commercial spheres and the spheres of blogs would also emerge in the foam, which, over time, would create a close proximity and high degree of imitation in the foam. Thus, the commercialisation of spheres of blogs was not binary in character but instead characterised by a gradual development.

As spheres emerge and begin to interact with one another over the course of time, it becomes apparent how commercialisation of spheres takes place. This development is characterised by a collective process involving and requiring the participation of those inhabitants of the spheres in question that share common interests. When this interaction and imitation of bordering spheres situated in foam takes place, this occurrence also feeds back and changes personal, private and commercial interests of spheres and redefines the structure of the foam as well as spheres and atmosphere, which become constantly negotiated by their inhabitants.

## Concluding remarks

In view of the discussion in this chapter relating to the character of blogospheres, and particularly the fashion blogospheres, as places for commercialisation, a sphereological perspective reveals the social interplay taking place in the spatial settings of social media. Relating to the formulated aim, this dissertation contributes to extant social media marketing literature by offering a novel framework to explain the role of marketing and consumers' integrated role in commercialisation processes in the spatial settings of places in social media.

A sphereological perspective implies an expanded role for marketing. More specifically, the role of marketing becomes one of navigating in the foam that embeds both a digital and physical spatial dimension that encompasses the search for collective interests and symbolic meanings materialising in these spatial settings. The primary role of marketing thereby becomes that of affecting, negotiating and redefining atmospheres of spheres. As argued previously, however, the negotiation of atmospheres does not encompass individual action but instead, collective action of the inhabitants of spheres. This widens the role of firms' marketing efforts, as it requires participation in spheres, and that wider sets of information streaming from personal, private and commercial interests that fill spheres with meaning be taken into consideration. In these settings, individuals that act as conductors filling spheres and atmospheres with meanings have a particular relevance for marketing. In order to become a part of these spheres, the meaning of commercial objects needs to correspond to the interests therein. The role of marketing from this perspective thereby becomes that of creating consumption objects that can be integrated by being aligned with the different interests of spheres. This in turn suggests recurrent and dynamic shifts of influence taking place over meanings of marketing but also over processes of co-commercialisation.

## Directions for future research

This dissertation has depicted the character of blogospheres, and fashion blogospheres in particular, as places for commercialisation, and it offered a sphereological perspective of social media marketing and processes of co-commercialisation. Based on these contributions, several directions for future research are relevant. One alternative concerns how spheres emerging around particular interests correspond to and interconnect with different segments of consumer objects and the consequences of this for established marketing practices from the perspective of firms. Put differently, using a sphereological approach to this issue would enable the study of how

consumers, firms and consumption objects together take part in commercial processes that redefine and change spheres as well as atmospheres of spheres. Another alternative would be to study how consumer-dominated marketing practices that emerge within social media and undergo commercialisation can be understood in an offline setting. In this context, it can be particularly interesting to study the meeting of consumers and producers in a retail environment. An ethnographic approach in a retail environment could potentially provide an understanding of how influential places within the spatial setting of blogospheres affect existing practices in contemporary retail environments. A third alternative concerns how the rise of blogospheres potentially offers good conditions for women's entrepreneurship. As many influential bloggers are women, and women have also dominated the studied blogospheres since their emergence, critical examination of why this is the case and what particular traits digital spatiality offers from this perspective would be of significant value.

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