



“55 Is Not Old!”: Aging and Identity in Fashion Blogs Targeting Female Baby Boomers

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Background and Purpose. With the development of technology comes more opportunities for consumers to engage in online activities (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013). Likewise, the advent of social media (e.g., blogs, Facebook, Instagram) has played a significant role in how consumers behave, offering them unprecedented opportunities to share their own consumption experiences and to make purchase decisions informed by those of others (Kulmala, Mesiranta, & Tuominen, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013). As a result, there have been several studies that examine the influence of social media use on consumers’ shopping behavior in general and for fashion products in particular (e.g., Esteban-Santos, García Medina, Carey, & Bellido-Pérez, 2018).

Consumers aged 55-73 (as of 2019) comprise the baby boomer generation, a cohort that is well known to be a significant consumer segment in the marketplace (Holmlund, Hagman, & Polska, 2011). One of the largest generations, their sheer numbers give this cohort an important role in the aging population of the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018). According to Binkley (2009), many consumers of this cohort are familiar with online shopping, and female baby boomers in particular have been found to shop online and use social media regularly, yet they tend to be a forgotten demographic when it comes to fashion. There is a great need for researchers and retailers alike to consider older women’s fashion needs and wants, as, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2018), there are now more Americans that are aging than are being born. However, existing research tends to focus on younger consumers (Holmlund et al., 2011), resulting in a lack of understanding of how older consumers use social media to communicate on topics important to them, including fashion. Moreover, while the influence of female baby boomers on marketplace trends has yet to be fully examined within research on fashion consumption, their use of social media to communicate about fashion in the context of growing older has also been largely ignored.

To address these gaps in knowledge, the purpose of this study was to explore fashion blogs developed by and for women aged 55 and over. Although there are several types of social media used to communicate about fashion, blogs were selected because this format provides “rich, detailed, longitudinal data about...consumption practices, values, meanings and beliefs” (Kozinets, 2006, p. 138). Moreover, the number of bloggers in the US is expected to reach 31.7

million by 2020 (Statista, 2019). Thus, it is likely that the number of fashion blogs targeting older women will increase, as will the number of older bloggers, indicating that the influence they have on fashion consumption behaviors will grow. Based on the purpose, two objectives were developed to guide the study: (1) to understand how fashion information is communicated to female baby boomers in the blog context, and (2) to explore how issues of aging and identity are discussed among female baby boomers specifically within the fashion blog context. Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) was used as a conceptual point of departure, as it has been employed in research on age and consumer decision-making and posits that, as consumers age, they focus on achieving emotional goals more than knowledge-related goals (Chang & Pham, 2013). This theory was augmented by the literature on dress and identity to better understand fashion consumption in the context of aging (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Method. A qualitative approach was employed to address the purpose and objectives of the study. Data were collected through netnographic observation, particularly using a “netblographic” approach, which applies a netnographic approach to blogs (Kozinets, 2006). The netnographic approach was adapted in this study as it uses information publicly available in an online forum to identify and understand relevant consumer groups (Kozinets, 2006). With IRB approval from the researchers’ university, observation data were collected over a three-month period during late 2018 and early 2019. Using an Internet search engine, Google, fashion-specific blogs that target older women in the US were identified using the search phrase, “older women fashion blogs.” The top five blogs targeting female baby boomers were selected based on number and recency of posts. Bloggers’ posts and interactions with the blog audience were considered, as were comments posted by and between audience members. A total of 317 posts and 6,511 comments were systemically recorded and reviewed during the data collection period. The data were analyzed to identify categories based on topics (Spiggle, 1994), including issues related to fashion and aging, products and aging, and brands. Three major themes emerged and were used to structure the interpretation: *Asserting Fashion Sensibility*, *Managing a Changing Identity*, and *Finding Allies in Aging*.

Results and Discussion. Bloggers provided information on fashion and advice meant to help audience members *assert fashion sensibility* as women 55 and older. That is, they offered their audience not just basic fashion information (e.g., recent trends, product availability with links, advice on brands, issues with apparel fit), but also tips for how to wear specific types of apparel. As Jennifer (blogger) posted, “Wearing texture and patterned fabric reduces the appearance of texture on our face.” Likewise, fashion decisions, such as what clothing and makeup colors work best for white or greying hair, appear to help audience members *manage a changing identity*

through fashion. Audience members frequently sought ideas on how to look good and dress well as they age, pointing to the importance of appearance and identity among them (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). While many posts had to do with dressing “age appropriate,” all of the bloggers regularly encouraged audience members to feel confident about their overall styles and specific outfits. Pamela posted, “We should always leave the house feeling confident of how we look,” highlighting the importance of the emotional goal of achieving confidence through one’s style and appearance (Carstensen et al., 1999). Bloggers also encouraged audience members to consider “graceful” aging and the importance of the self despite negative messages about appearing old, and to manage fears related to aging by, again, feeling confident in their fashion consumption choices. The blogs appear to provide female baby boomers a virtual platform to *find allies in aging* by connecting with others who share similar experiences and who regularly provide emotional support (Chang & Pham, 2013) for a variety of issues. Audience members actively discussed what looking “old” means and shared experiences with age-related physical and mental changes. Many sought close relationships with each other, and blog posts often covered age-related topics such as menopause or other health issues that can be hard to talk with friends about offline. As Sara commented, “Funny how we cannot discuss [such problems] with friends but our friend Beth [blogger] is always there keeping us informed discreetly.”

Implications and Further Research. Findings of this qualitative study reveal the extent to which fashion blogs offer women 55 and over more than just fashion advice, but a means to establish social connections and gain emotional support through the shared experience of aging. With the purchasing power and growing number of older consumers, it has been argued that Americans are moving into a “new era of positive aging” (Barnhart & Penaloza, 2013, p. 1136). Results of this study reveal the positive nature of blog interactions around aging relative to fashion consumption among female consumers over 55. Further research is needed on the role of fashion within the aging process. Interest in appearance and looking good does not have to diminish with age, yet gaps in the existing research suggest as much. As a powerful consumer cohort, female baby boomers’ perspectives and experiences must be understood in order to address their marketplace needs and expectations. Likewise, in light of the proliferation of social media use among this cohort, there is much to be learned from baby boomers as they use social media to share experiences with and build emotional bonds through fashion, appearance, and the aging process.

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