Researching Online Communities of Practice:

Expressions of Solidarity, Support and Reciprocity in Style Blogs

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Pro gradu-tutkielmani käsittelee tyyliblogeja yhteisöllisyysnäkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen painopiste on yhteisöllisyyden rakentuminen blogeissa solidaarisuuden, tuen ja vastavuoroisuuden käsitteiden kautta. Materiaalina tutkimuksessa on käytetty neljästä englanninkielisestä tyyliblogista syksyllä 2012 kerättyjä blogitekstejä kommentteineen.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisen viitekehyksen muodostavat Wengerin (1998) kehittämä Communities of Practice –teoria, Herringin (2004) malli tietokonevälitteisen viestinnän tutkimukseen sekä aiempi verkkoyhteisöjä koskeva tutkimus. Menetelmällisesti tutkimus on tietokonevälitteisen datan diskurssianalyysi, joka keskittyy solidaarisuutta, tukea ja vastavuoroisuutta merkitsevien ilmaisujen tunnistamiseen ja kartoittamiseen.

Tutkimuksen analyysiosio on kaksiosainen: ensimmäinen osa esittelee blogeista löytyneitä yhteisöllisyyden piirteitä yleisesti, peilaten niitä aiemman tutkimuksen asettamiin verkkoyhteisöjä koskeviin määritelmiin. Jälkimmäinen osa puolestaan keskittyy solidaarisuuden, tuen ja vastavuoroisuuden ilmaisujen tarkempaan analyysiin.

Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on luoda tietoisuutta Internetissä kommunikaation kautta tapahtuvasta yhteisöllisyydestä. Internetin välityksellä ylläpidettävää sosiaalista toimintaa pidetään usein eristävänä ja riittämättömänä, mutta verkkoyhteisöistä voi myös muodostua perinteisten yhteisöjen kaltaisia tärkeitä verkostoja. Hypoteesini on, että tyyliblogeista voi kehittyä yhteisöjä, joille on muotoutunut omia perinteitä ja rutiininomaisia ilmaisun tapoja.

Tutkielma osoittaa, että blogit soveltuvat hyvin yhteisöllisyyttä koskevan tutkimuksen materiaaliksi, ja luo kuvaa siitä, millä erilaisilla kielellisillä keinoilla blogien kirjoittajat ja lukijat yhteisöllisyyttä ilmaisevat.

Avainsanat: internet, yhteisöllisyys, diskurssianalyysi, blogi, verkkoyhteisö

Keywords: internet, community, discourse analysis, blog, online community

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1 Introduction

In the year 2013, social networking on the Internet is a part of everyday life in many Western societies (Herring 2004, 12). The Internet is used on a daily basis to exchange information and ideas, and a number of people have professional or personal relationships that take place mostly online (Luzón 2011, 1; Kouper 2010, 1). Especially young people spend an increasing amount of time online: in a survey conducted in the United States in 2009, 92 percent of people aged 18-29 said they use the Internet (Baym 2010, 19).

Unlike other mass media, the Internet makes it possible for private citizens to really get involved in discussions about politics, health, social issues and culture. In fact, the Internet has facilitated the advent of mass self-communication (Castells 2007, 246); the line between mass and personal communication has become blurred, allowing people to "communicate personally within what used to be prohibitively large groups" (Baym 2010, 4) – a good example of this is an online discussion group dedicated to the fans of a globally viewed television show. In the 2000's, web-content has also become increasingly user-generated, which has led to a phenomenon referred to as Web 2.0 (Baym 2010, 16), or read/write web (Wenger et al. 2009, 17). As Thurlow et al. (2004, 76) put it, nowadays "people don't just consume internet content but they also provide it".

The Internet has become, as Himelboim (2008, 156-157) puts it, "a space where individuals can step in and be heard"; potentially even "a revolutionary platform for public discourse and information exchange". Because it facilitates interaction with like-minded people from all across the globe, the Internet is now home to millions of micro-communities of people that keep regular contact with each other. Perhaps because of the rising popularity of these new types of social groups, one of the most discussed themes related to online interaction is the notion of online community (Herring 1996, 3-4).

Creating and maintaining a sense of community online is also the focus of this thesis, which investigates communication on blogs. The objective of the thesis is to analyze a specific, topical variety of blogs, style blogs, from the point of view of an online community. Using discourse-analytic methods, I will conduct a qualitative study that aims to find out how the authors and readers of style blogs use language online to interact together as a community. The hypothesis is that a blog can develop interactional features that become routinized practices, qualifying it as what Wenger (1998) terms a community of practice.

In the various interactions that take place between the members of an online group, there are many features that seem interesting from a research point of view. Herring (2004, 355), for example, identifies six sets of criteria for a virtual community, all of which could be useful starting points for a study of online groups:

(1) Active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants

(2) Shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values

(3) Solidarity, support, reciprocity

(4) Criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution

(5) Self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups

(6) Emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

Although I have included a general overview on the many ways in which the authors and readers of style blogs use language as a means of creating and maintaining a sense of community, a comprehensive analysis of all the community-building features is beyond the scope of a pro gradu thesis. Therefore, the study will focus on the third criterion on Herring's list: solidarity, support and reciprocity. The decision to study these particular qualities was data-driven; in a hermeneutic process of examining blog data and Herring's criteria side by side, interactive phenomena related to solidarity, support and reciprocity came up frequently.

By conducting a close analysis of these phenomena, I seek to answer the following research questions:

(1) In what ways do the authors and readers of four different style blogs express solidarity, support and reciprocity?

(2) How do the interactions that take place in the blogs contribute to maintaining a sense of community?

The central theoretical tools for the analysis are the Community of Practice theory, coined by Wenger (1998), and Herring's (2004) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) approach. Of course, in order to look at a style blog from the point of view of an online community, I first need to establish what constitutes an online community, and whether it can be successfully used to describe a blog, or a network of blogs that revolves around a specific area of interest. To accomplish this, I will examine the already existing research on the subject of online interaction and virtual communities.

The topic of the thesis belongs under the heading of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which is a relatively new, interdisciplinary field of study. Defined by Herring (1996, 1) as "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers", the study of CMC can be seen as a communication-focused sub-field of Internet Studies (Thurlow et al. 2004, 21). It is by no means a field that is easily defined, or a field with "nice sharp boundaries", as Thurlow et al. (2004, 22) put it. However, it remains an interesting and multifunctional field, with strong ties to many academic disciplines: media studies, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, economy, computer science and psychology, to name a few (ibid.).

The structure of the thesis is as follows: In chapter 2, I will explain the motivation behind my choice of topic and highlight why I – and a number of established researchers of CMC – think that researching online community is important. Chapter 3 outlines the

theoretical framework of the study and provides more insight into the much discussed topic of online community, outlining views that have been expressed about it in previous research. Chapter 4 introduces the data, and describes the method of analysis. Chapter 5 moves on to the actual empirical analysis of the blog data. The chapter is divided into two parts; the first part provides a general overview of community-like qualities in style blogs, while the second part consists of a close analysis of the expressions of solidarity, support and reciprocity in the blogs. The sixth and final chapter of the thesis summarizes the findings, and provides possible directions for future study.

2 Background: Why Study Blogs?

This chapter introduces the concept of blogging, and provides some background on the subject of whether blogs can be considered as communities. In addition, the goal of the chapter is to describe the reasoning behind my choice of topic – in other words, to answer the question why investigating online community in blogs is important.

What makes blogs a subject worthy of academic study? One of the main reasons is the fact that the rise of social networking through blogging is a rather new phenomenon – while the concept of blogging was born already in the late 1990's, in their current form, blogs are a much more recent development (Siles 2012, 409; 411). Because of this, fairly little research has been carried out on blogs from a community perspective, and most of the existing research seems to focus simply on whether or not blogs *can* be thought of as communities (Hartelius 2005, 72). For example, Blanchard (2004) has pondered if a blog can be classified as a virtual community in her case study of the *Julie/Julia Project*, and Luzón (2011), who studied social behavior on academic blogs, also treats blogs as communities in her research. However, the specific *ways* in which a sense of community might be established in blogs have not yet received a lot of scholarly attention.

Blogs are websites authored by either one individual or a group of people, which present content in reverse chronological order (i.e. the most recent update appears above the previous updates on the page) (Baym 2010, 16). As a medium of communication, blogs are asynchronous, meaning that there are time delays between messages – although it is of course possible for a blogger to reply to a comment immediately after receiving it, making the communication closer to a real-time exchange (Kouper 2010, 2 and Baym 2010, 7).

When blogs first started appearing in the late 1990's, they were primarily used as "frequently updated lists of annotated hyperlinks" (Siles 2012, 414), mostly providing links to external online content that the author found interesting and useful. Perhaps because of this historical background, most people still view blog writing as a rather one-sided, one-way activity. However, after the use of search engines became popular, the early filter-type blogs became obsolete, and blogging practices had to evolve and specialize (Hartelius 2005, 79).

Today, the content of a blog might be almost anything: it varies between personal diaries and blogs dedicated to one specific area of interest, such as lifestyle, travel, food or politics (Baym 2010, 16). A blog can have thousands of readers every day, and interaction and networking have become an important part of the blogging process – as Luzón (2011, 2) points out, blogs are a genre that both "enables self-presentation and…incorporates social tools which support participation and conversation". Even though the author's self-expression still takes up the majority of a blog's content, most blogs include an embedded commenting function, which makes it possible for the readers to interact with both the author of a blog, as well as the other readers (Stavrositu and Sundar 2012, 370-372). Baym (2010, 16) also highlights the importance of a blog roll (a list of links to other blogs, which most authors include in the side panel of their own blog): they create connections between different blogs, as well as "drive traffic" amongst them. All this interaction between different blogs and their

readers has lead, according to Stavrositu and Sundar (2012, 372), to the "emergence of veritable blog communities" on the Internet.

There are two reasons for why I think research on online communities is of importance. First, the subject is very topical and relatable; as mentioned before, communicating and maintaining relationships on the Internet has become a regular activity for a growing number of people (Herring 2004, 12). Second, even though internet-based ways to be social *have* become so common, there still remains some prejudice towards them. Throughout history, people have "responded to new media with confusion", forming polarized opinions about new, unknown technologies (Baym 2010, 1). There is some debate, even among scholars, about whether or not the rise of the virtual community is a positive development (Hartelius 2005, 74-75). As Thurlow et al. (2004, 46) point out, online communication is still viewed by some as "an inadequate mode of communication", as well as "asocial and antisocial". Himelboim (2008, 157-158) also mentions that although many people acknowledge the advantages the Internet holds over other mass media, because it provides a "free platform for public discussions" where individuals are "less likely to be judged based on gender, race, age, occupation, experience or other demographics", others seem to see increased online interaction leading into a darker, almost dystopian future. There have even been suggestions that "the Internet destroys community, leaving individuals isolated and alienated because online relationships lack the satisfaction of real-life relationships" (ibid.).

While it is true that the Internet has its pitfalls, such as its addictive qualities (Rheingold 1995, 228) and the fact that it can facilitate hostile behavior under the cover of anonymity (Kolko and Reid 1998, 221-222), the idea of online interaction as a threat to "real" community seems quite antiquated. First of all, it is no longer realistic to think of communities as dense neighborhood networks defined by geographical proximity; as sociologists have come to notice, nowadays people develop strong, community-like ties with

friends who might live in an entirely different area (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 169). According to Castells (2007, 246) "[the] diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time". In fact, the notion of online community can be seen as merely the latest turn in the ongoing shift from communities centered around places to communities centered around common interests (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 172).

Second of all, a large number of people have been able to form meaningful and close relationships online (Thurlow et al. 2004, 111). In many cases, these relationships intermingle with offline ones; online interactions lead to offline meetings, and interacting online may also deepen an already existing offline relationship (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 182). In fact, research suggests that online communities are not necessarily all that different from traditional communities, as both offline and online relationships tend to be "intermittent, specialized and varying in strength" (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 186). According to Bergs, (2006, 11) studies have proved that "some online ties are qualitatively no different from offline ties…they can sometimes show a very high degree of transactional content, e.g. through exchange of information, support, and trust". Baym (2010, 82) also points out that sometimes members of online communities provide each other with the same kind of emotional support that we usually get in close personal relationships. Furthermore, research shows that especially shy people find social interaction a lot more comfortable in online environments (Thurlow et al. 2004, 62). There is, in fact, a significant amount of people who find written communication preferable to the face-to-face kind, because they do not excel in spontaneous interaction, but may have a lot of valuable input if they have time to consider their words (Rheingold 1995, 23). Individuals who might be in a socially disadvantaged position offline can experience a sense of empowerment in being a part of an online

community (Chen, Boase and Wellman 2002, 101), and online interaction can also be an important social resource for a physically disabled person (Rheingold 1995, 237-238). In other words, for some people, online communication is a way out of being asocial and into being a part of a community, as oppose to the other way around.

I think casting light on online interaction and online communities by the means of research is a good way to lessen the "tendency for people to idealize offline communication", which Thurlow et al. (2004, 50) name as "one of the biggest problems" concerning the field of CMC. According to Jones (1998, 24), this ideal of "real", somehow superior and more authentic offline communication is probably rooted in the fact that community is usually associated with face-to-face contact – which is why we can say that exploring the ways in which people construct community online is especially significant. Because online communication consists of such a variety of different patterns, Thurlow et al. (2004, 76) emphasize it is "vital that scholars undertake local and 'immediate' analyses of CMC – in other words, looking at how specific groups of people use communication technologies in their immediate social contexts".

In my research, this specific group of people consists of individuals who write and comment on style blogs. Blogs in general are an excellent research subject for a CMC focused study because of their popularity; since tens of thousands of blogs are created and more than a million posts published every day (Castells 2007, 247), the blogosphere seems to attract a large number of people who wish to interact and express themselves online. I chose this particular variety of blogs partly because of my personal interest in and knowledge of style blogging, and partly because it appears to be a rather popular, well-known genre. At the moment many style and fashion blogs are presented as very influential in the blogosphere, as well as in the fashion industry; for example, in September 2011, BBC News (Murray 2011) reported that consumers are now likely to be "relying less on magazines and more on bloggers

to tell them what they'll be wearing", referring to the phenomenon as a "blogging revolution". Furthermore, despite their popularity, style blogs have so far remained largely unexplored as a subject of academic research.

3 Theoretical Framework

At the center of the theoretical framework of the thesis lies the Community of Practice theory, developed by Wenger (1998). Building on Wenger's ideas, I aim to validate the hypothesis that style blogs can indeed cultivate community-like features, and explore some of the practices the members of these communities use to express solidarity, support and reciprocity. In addition to Wenger's theory, the theoretical framework of the study comprises of Herring's (2004) model of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, as well as an overview of some of the previous research focusing on online interaction and communities.

The first part of this chapter explains what is meant by a "community of practice", and why it is a concept important to this thesis. After that, I will move on to the CMDA approach, and describe the "theoretical toolkit" that I have constructed based on Herring's (2004) model. Finally, in the last part of this chapter, some general problems and advantages of studying online community, defined by previous research on the topic, will be introduced.

3.1 Communities of Practice

In this study, the notion of online community is approached from the point of view of a *community of practice* (CoP), which Eckert (2006, 1) describes as follows: "… a collection of people who engage on an ongoing basis in some common endeavor. Communities of practice emerge in response to common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them". These

communities share practices that are habitual and often unconscious – "routinized behaviors" (Baym 2010, 77).

The idea of a CoP was first defined in detail by Wenger (1998, 12), who discussed the concepts of identity and community in relation to learning as social participation. The primary focus of his theory is the "process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger 1998, 4). According to him, we all belong to several communities of practice at a time – at home, at school, at work, in our hobbies – that have developed their own practices, routines, rituals, histories and conventions (Wenger 1998, 6).

For Wenger (1998, 52), the concept of practice is strongly tied to a process which he refers to as "negotiation of meaning". This process consists of a duality of participation and reification (ibid.). By participation, Wenger (1998, 55-56) means the active process of taking part in and sharing social enterprises with others, and the possibility of constructing identity through these connections and relations to other people. Reification, on the other hand, refers to the construction of abstractions, symbols, terms and concepts that takes place within a community and shapes the participants experience (Wenger 1998, 59). Inside a community, participation is shown in the examples of interactivity, membership and mutuality between group members. Reification, on the other hand, is apparent in, for example, the norms, rules, documents and conventions of the community that have evolved over time (Wenger 1998, 62-63). The two concepts complement and compensate for each other, and the interplay between participation and reification is fundamental for the structure of a CoP (Wenger 1998, 62-65). According to Wenger et al. (2002, 5), the development of both personal relationships and established manners of interacting is an essential part of what makes any group a community.

Wenger (1998, 72-73) lists three characteristics that define practice as a source of community coherence: *mutual engagement*, a *joint enterprise*, and a *shared repertoire*. A

community does not necessitate geographical proximity (Wenger 1998, 74) , but there needs to be a mutual engagement – something a group of people do, a topic that connects them and makes them interact with each other on a regular basis, as they help each other gain knowledge and expertise on the subject (Wenger et al. 2002, 4). To keep a community of practice together, the members must also have a joint enterprise: some sort of common aim (for example, in the case of a professional community, well-fare in the workplace) (Wenger 1998, 77-79). However, rather than one "stated goal", a joint enterprise is an evolving process negotiated by the members of the community in their day-to-day actions, and the members also share mutual accountability for the succession of the enterprise (ibid.). In time, a community also develops a shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83); the participants cultivate a "unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches" (Wenger et al. 2002, 5). A shared repertoire can include specific routines, words, stories, gestures, styles and actions – simply put, different ways of doing and saying things that have become a part of the group's shared practice (Wenger 1998, 83).

Even though Wenger's first book on communities of practice was written in the 1990's, before the massive increase in social networking on the Internet, he hints that his theory might also be used for studying online communication: "Across a worldwide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests." (Wenger 1998, 6-7.) Online communication enables people to quickly find new places where a subject close to their hearts is discussed, and peers that share the same interests as them (Rheingold 1995, 27); the Internet has created new methods of finding and forming communities of practice.

Several researchers have already utilized the Community of Practice Theory in their studies of different CMC environments. For example Bergs (2006, 6) has proposed that the concept of a community of practice could be helpful in analyzing an online community,

especially pointing out a need for research on "how communities of practice develop over time and how exactly network roles and norms gradually develop, particularly when network actors do not know each other face-to-face, but only online" (Bergs 2006, 14). Stommel (2008) successfully used Community of Practice theory, combined with Herring's (2004) CMDA model, in her analysis of an online discussion forum on eating disorders. In her study, Stommel (2008, 7) found that members of online communities can develop a set of shared norms that define, for example, what kind of comments and questions are acceptable in the community. She also encourages "more systematic research on web-based platforms" to "illuminate the exact relation between interactional activities and the criteria for online community, so as to understand what … CoP can reveal about online interactive behavior" (Stommel 2008, 8). Also Herring (2004, 345) refers to Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice in her own definition for an online community, describing online groups where "participation is centered around a shared professional focus" as "plausible candidates for virtual community status". Later on, Wenger himself has also used the communities of practice approach in studying digital habitats (Wenger et al. 2009, 11).

In my analysis of style blogs, Wenger's (1998, 73) three defining features of a CoP – mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire – will play a key role. I will examine the material collected from the blogs to trace communication patterns that denote solidarity, support and reciprocity, and then compare these patterns to the three pillars that define a CoP to show how they contribute to maintaining a sense of community.

Style blogs can be characterized as "specialized social networks", where participants are brought together and bonded by a shared interest (style and fashion), which becomes the epicenter of discussion (Thurlow et al. 2004, 113). Hence, the members' interest in style and fashion related topics is the blog community's mutual engagement, and helping each other

develop their sense of style and expand their knowledge of fashion can be seen as the joint enterprise.

When studying a soap opera fan group on Usenet, Baym (2010, 77) discovered that the members of an online community can share "insider lingo", which can include specific vocabulary, words and acronyms, as well as particular communication styles and genres (cf. Gumperz 1982, 202). For example, on the style blogs I studied, the authors regularly write posts that belong to certain genres, such as "outfit of the day" (commonly abbreviated to OOTD) or "Monthly Must Reads". The use of inside terms and genres acts as a marker of "insider status" and can help form a group identity, which strengthens the feeling of community (Baym 2010, 78). In his study of German-based hip-hop websites, Androutsopoulos (2008, 13) noted similar patterns: the participants used slang to both highlight their affiliation with a particular group (hip-hop musicians and fans) and to distance themselves from others (such as 'mainstream' pop fans). This kind of use of specific style- and genre-related choices is what makes up an online community's shared repertoire.

3.2 Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis

Methodologically, this thesis is a discourse-analytic study. More specifically, it can be categorized as an example of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), a research approach developed for analyzing online interaction by Herring (2004). While the specific method of analysis used in this research will be described in more detail in chapter 4.3, this section introduces some of the theoretical tools associated with CMDA, and describes their relevance from the point of view of my research topic.

Herring (2004, 359) lists five different paradigms whose analytical methods might be useful in analyzing CMC: Text Analysis, Conversation Analysis, Pragmatics, Interactional Sociolinguistics, and Critical Discourse Analysis. The researcher is instructed to draw on these paradigms as appropriate, and thus construct a helpful 'toolkit' for analyzing computer-

mediated material (Herring 2004, 358). According to Herring (2004, 340), the aim of CMDA is to allow "diverse theories about discourse and computer-mediated communication to be entertained and tested".

Of the five paradigms suggested by Herring, there were two that proved relevant to the analysis of style blogs: pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics. Pragmatics is the method most suited for analyzing features such as politeness, speech acts and relevance, while interactional sociolinguistics is useful in studying socio-cultural phenomena such as discourse styles and verbal genres (Herring 2004, 359). Because a lot of the communication that took place in the data included the use of politeness strategies and face maintenance, pragmatics focused studies, most notably Brown and Levinson's (1987) research on politeness, turned out to be important for my investigation of style blogs. Interactional sociolinguistics, on the other hand, lent support to the idea that group specific ways of communicating – Wenger's (1998, 82-83) idea of a shared repertoire – are a central part of maintaining a sense of community. Additionally, interactional sociolinguistics emphasizes the notion of contextualization, which is also especially relevant when studying online communication, because it lacks the nonverbal cues that help contextualize face to face interaction. In the following sub-sections, I will say a few words about each of these two research paradigms that form my "CMDA toolkit", and describe their relevance from the point view of this study in more detail.

3.2.1 Pragmatics and Politeness

Pragmatics aims to provide conditions in which an "utterance-act" can be successful, as well as to explain *why* this act might be either accepted or rejected by the other agents participating in the interaction (van Dijk 1977, 190, emphasis added). To put it simply, the idea at the core of pragmatics is that "when we are speaking in certain contexts we also accomplish certain social acts" (van Dijk 1977, 218).

Early on in the research, I noticed that the notion of politeness was of importance when interacting in an online community. The construction of various politeness strategies, such as hedging, indirectness and the use of conditionals appeared especially important in the case of what van Dijk (1977, 195) refers to as "illocutionary acts", such as making a request or asking for advice. If a request is to be positively received, the speech act of making the request must be satisfactory both from the point of view of the asker, and the receiver (van Dijk 1977, 215); for example, if a reader of a style blog asks the author's advice or makes a request concerning the content of the blog, she knows that by expressing politeness toward the author she is more likely to get what she wants.

In analyzing politeness in style blog interactions, I will utilize the idea of maintaining *face*, defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, 61) as a "public self-image that every member [of society] wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects". These aspects are, respectively, called *positive face* and *negative face*. By positive face, Brown and Levinson (1987, 61) refer to "the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants". Negative face, on the other hand, is defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (ibid.).

To avoid performing a threat to the other's face or making their own face vulnerable in interaction, speakers need to use certain communication strategies. *Positive politeness* is used to preserve the hearer's positive face by making sure the hearer knows that she is admired and liked by the speaker, and by stressing the friendly relationship between the participants; the fact that the speaker and the hearer are "of the same kind" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 72). *Negative politeness*, on the other hand, can help the speaker to save the hearer's negative face by, for example, showing respect and keeping her distance, e.g. by reassuring the hearer that she is not necessarily required to do what the speaker asks of her (ibid.).

The concepts of politeness and face work relate to discussing solidarity, support and reciprocity as community-building features for online groups, as they can be used to shape a community's norms and practices. Baym (2010, 79), for example, noted specific uses of politeness in her research, as she found that the members of a particular discussion group "shared a commitment to friendliness", which was apparent in the way the community members expressed disagreement with each other, using politeness strategies such as qualification and partial agreement. The supportive atmosphere that resulted from the careful construction of the speech acts denoting disagreement became a social norm in the community. Also Luzón (2011, 14), who studied interaction on academic blogs, noted that the use of politeness strategies was a common practice among the bloggers and the readers – these strategies were used especially in situations where requests were made or disagreement expressed.

The construction of successful politeness norms seems integral from the point of view of community development, and could be seen as a part of what Wenger (1998, 77-79) referred to as a community's joint enterprise; certain models of communication are developed within the community to guarantee that the community members understand each other, and feel like their best interest is shared by others in the group.

3.2.2 Interactional Sociolinguistics and Contextualization

Interactional Sociolinguistics is an approach based on the framework constructed by John Gumperz (1982) that aims to find out "how speakers signal and interpret meaning in social interaction" (Bailey 2008, 2314). Influenced by pragmatics, anthropology, linguistics and conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics is concerned with not only speech, but also its socio-cultural context (Bailey 2008, 2314-2315). A central task of interactional sociolinguistics, according to Gumperz (1982, 208), is demonstrating how "relational signs

function to signal activities and discourse tasks" and how "interpretations are agreed upon and altered in the course of an interaction".

There are many aspects of interactional sociolinguistics that make it applicable for the study of online communities. In virtual environments, the notion of *contextualization* becomes especially important due to the text-based nature of the interactions between participants. As Tannen (1984, 156-157) points out, contextualization is an important part of analyzing conversation – even rather simple, everyday conversations can seem indecipherable when taken out of context. According to Gumperz (1982, 131), speakers use various *contextualization cues* to help each other interpret "what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows". These cues can include any linguistic features that contribute "to the signaling of contextual presuppositions" – for example changes in code, style or dialect, as well as certain prosodic phenomena, lexical and syntactic choices and formulaic expressions (ibid.). For example, with the help of contextualization cues such as a smile or a marked intonation, the same utterance can be interpreted either as a sincere compliment or a sarcastic insult (Bailey 2008, 2315).

Online communication faces the challenge of the lack of cues based on pitch, tone and facial expressions. To distinguish between different conversational genres, such as joking and making factual statements, online communities have had to create new ways of adding social meaning to speech acts – these include, for example, the use of emoticons (Baym 1998, 61) and metadiscriptions (Rheingold 1995, 177).

Potential miscommunications resulting from the different socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants, and hence their different interpretations of certain contextualization cues, can change the course of interaction, and sometimes even extinguish the possibility of further interactions. As Gumperz (1982, 151) points out, a misunderstanding might lead to one of the

participants thinking that they are not on the same wavelength as their conversational partner, and therefore refraining from any future interaction. This notion of miscommunication is also relevant for the present study: in the case of reader-author interactions in blogs, if the reader does not receive a satisfactory reply to her comment from the author, she might interpret this as a rejection, and cease being a part of that particular blog community. Additionally, since most popular style blogs have an international, multicultural audience, some readers might have trouble interpreting formulaic expressions that are self-evident for the speakers of, for example, American or British English (Gumperz 1982, 145). Sufficient contextualization is therefore in the interest of a community's joint enterprise (Wenger 1998, 77-79), since it helps the community members' understand each other and avoid misapprehensions.

Gumperz (1982, 202) also points out another aspect of interactional sociolinguistics that is especially noteworthy from the point of view of my study; the fact that particular social groups and networks can develop their own "symbolic value to co-occurring constellations of speech variants, rhythm, and prosody". For example, Tannen (1984, 77) noticed in her study of conversation among friends that when New York born people talked to other New Yorkers, their talk started to exhibit certain patterns that are specific to "New York style", such as "intensity, pace, overlap, loudness and emphasis on rapport". Certain ways of speaking can therefore act as markers of social identity and shared cultural background (Gumperz 1982, 202). This relates to the use of group-specific verbal styles and genres that can strengthen the feeling of community within the group – in other words, the use of what Baym (2010, 77) refers to as insider lingo, an important part of a community's shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83).

3.3 Defining an Online Community

As mentioned earlier, the notion of virtual communities is, according to Herring (1996, 3-4) one of the key issues of CMC research. Because web discussions can be easily saved and

thoroughly analyzed at a later time, Internet based group interactions are at a unique position as material for investigating community. As Herring (1996, 4) puts it, data from online communities can be easily used to gain "insights into the genesis of human social organization".

There is no doubt that online community is one of the most discussed themes in Internet related research, and one that divides opinions between scholars. People have different perceptions of what "community" means, which also results in different views of what online community is like – and what it should be like (Thurlow et al. 2004, 108). Many still hold on to the more traditional definition of community as a shared geographical location, and even some researchers of CMC believe virtual community to be a myth (Thurlow et al. 2004, 109-110).

Yet, the fact remains that a large number of Internet users do experience a sense of being a part of an online community, and some even think of these virtual communities as shared places (Baym 2010, 75); a good example of this are Chat "rooms", where users can "meet" other people according to, for example, their personal interests or location (Werry 1996, 48-49). Many studies show that features we tend to associate with community can also be present in online groups, especially those that are defined by the participants' common interest; for example Collot and Belmore (1996, 26), who studied Bulletin Board Systems, noted that people who visited the sites frequently knew each other's "nicknames, mannerisms and ideas", "followed each other's arguments" and had "accumulated a wealth of shared knowledge" – much like any other group of friends or colleagues who spend time together regularly.

In my analysis of style blogs, the hypothesis is that online community does exist, and it is possible to experience a sense of it through blogging. However, I do not think it useful to make an absolute separation between online and offline communities, not to mention debating

which one is superior to the other. In fact, these days the lines between offline and online relationships tend to be blurry and enmeshed, with offline friends keeping in contact via Internet and online acquaintances sometimes meeting in real life (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 182). Social interactions formed in face-to-face contact and with the aid of technology both exist in our lives, side by side (Jones 1998, 29).

Because of the lack of extra-linguistic cues that, to some extent, defines online community, some people tend to consider all online interactions distancing and impersonal, while others see the same phenomenon as liberating – online communities are seen as free from social constraints concerning gender, class and ethnicity, and therefore "inherently democratic" (Herring 1996, 4). On the other hand, online communication – and by association, online community – also has its downsides. Internet use has the potential to be addictive (Rheingold 1995, 228) and to encourage irresponsible behavior (Kolko and Reid 1998, 221-222), and oppressive social hierarchies can be constructed just as easily online as offline (Kolko and Reid 1998, 217).

Rather than taking the utopian view (online communication equals true democracy and betters everything from political activity to education) or the dystopian view (online communication lacks depth and extinguishes 'real' communities), it is perhaps wisest to follow the example set by Quan-Haase et al. (2002, 296), and think of online communication as a useful supplement to other forms of human interaction such as telephone conversations and face-to-face contact. The same principle could perhaps be applied to the notion of virtual community; as in Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice theory, we can think of the individual belonging to several different communities at the same time – some of them offline, some online and some a mixture of both. None of these communities need to be considered "better" or "more important" than others: instead, we might focus on how these

different communities are born, how they complement each other, and shape our identity through participation.

In the analysis in chapter 5, my goal is to investigate *how* online communities are formed by and maintained in interaction, rather than simply compare them to traditional communities. To conduct a successful qualitative analysis of the interactions that take place within an online group, some criteria for online community, suggested by previous research, are required. Baym (2010, 75), for example, identifies five qualities of online groups that are also found in many definitions of "community": sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships. These five qualities, as well as Herring's (2004, 355) criteria that was introduced in chapter 2.1 and Rheingold's (1995, 13) framework for defining online community, will all be used as theoretical support in the investigation style blogs.

4 Data and Method

In the first two parts of this chapter, I will describe my method of collecting material and provide short introductions for the four blogs that were used in the final analysis. The last part of the chapter introduces the method of analysis.

4.1 Data Collection and Criteria

My starting points for searching for blogs that were suitable for this study were two webpages that listed style, fashion and beauty blogs. First, I discovered a list of "The 99 Most Influential Fashion and Beauty Blogs" (Internet Source 1), published at *Signature9*, a webpage that "covers lifestyle news, products, and business and consumer trends across the categories of men's and women's style, tech, food, design, pop culture and more" (Internet Source 2). The second webpage that I found useful was Handpicked Media, a "Social Media Agency and

network of Independent Websites and Blogs" (Internet Source 3) that has its own section dedicated to fashion blogs (Internet Source 4). The blog candidates for the study were all discovered through these two lists; some were mentioned on the lists themselves, but most of them were found indirectly, via the listed authors' blogrolls and comment sections.

The main criteria for the choosing the blogs were the following:

(1) The blog must be clearly identified as a style and/or fashion blog; lifestyle-focused blogs, or blogs where the author writes extensively about their personal life, will not be eligible. (However, I have included blogs that feature occasional posts concerning beauty products and home décor, as well as clothing. The objective of the thesis is to study *style* blogs, and all these subjects can be grouped under the heading of "style".)
(2) The blog must have a reasonably wide readership (at least one hundred registered followers), consisting of readers who comment regularly on the author's posts.
(3) The author must maintain some contact with the readers, either acknowledging their comments in the main blog texts, or posting replies in the comments section.
(4) At least a clear majority of the blog's posts must be written in English.

Initially, I chose a sample of roughly twenty blog candidates based on the criteria. Because of the scope of a pro gradu thesis, I later narrowed the list down to four blogs. The final four were chosen because they contained a high amount of reader-author interaction, and were updated more frequently than some of the other candidates. The data consists of all the blog entries posted in the chosen blogs between October 15 and November 15, 2012, as well as the comments submitted to those entries. (Note that the data was collected after all the entries had been posted, so some of the comments may have been posted after November 15, 2012. However, none of the entries posted in the blogs after that date, or any comments posted to those entries, were used.) In the following section, I will introduce each of the chosen blogs

with a short description. The blogs were coded as Blog 1, 2, 3 and 4 respectively, according to the alphabetical order of the title.

4.2 Blog Descriptions

Blog 1

Blog 1 is a fashion and beauty blog with 773 readers through Google Friend Connect (the number of readers on March 19, 2013). The author describes herself in her profile in these words:

> "A twenty-something southern California native who adores all things fashion and beauty related. I don't take it seriously though, because unless you're saving a life, it isn't that important! But a killer pair of heels and some shimmery lip gloss never hurt anyone." (Internet Source 5)

As well as the authors of Blog 4 and 3, the author of Blog 1 belongs to the "Monthly Must Reads" circle, where bloggers answer a monthly question in their posts and link to what other style bloggers are writing about during that particular month. The blog features "outfit of the day" posts, cosmetics reviews and giveaways, as well as "wish list" posts, where the author links to fashion and beauty products she would like to acquire next. The author answers readers' questions regularly, asks questions in return and thanks when given positive feedback.

Blog 2

Blog 2 has 9562 followers on Google Friend Connect, and 5020 on Facebook (the amount of followers on March 19, 2013). The author herself describes the blog with a short, to-the-point statement: "Just so you know this is a blog about shopping. It doesn't get any deeper than that." (Internet Source 6). Most of the blog posts introduce items of clothing and accessories in "outfit of the day" form, but the author also provides her readers with, for example, cosmetics recommendations and tips on where to shop. The majority of the posts include links to websites where the reader can buy similar items. The author communicates quite a lot with

her readers – even the most basic "You look nice!" type of comments usually get a reply. Even though the posts are mostly related to style and shopping, the discussions in the comments section show a lot of variety; the author and the readers exchange thoughts on anything from book recommendations to pet problems.

Blog 3

Even though Blog 3 is a blog that covers posts related to beauty, décor and food, it was eligible for my research because a clear majority of the content is style- and fashion related material. The style-centric approach is also visible in the author's profile description:

> "I've always been interested in self-improvement - and I find fashion media inspirational...I won't starve myself trying to replicate an airbrushed model, but I will try to be the healthiest, happiest person that I can be! I like to splurge on quality items, but am also interested in being thrifty...a dollar saved on clothes is a dollar that can be put towards my "designer handbag fund"!
>
> My favorite part of blogging is discovering and sharing beauty & style secrets. I love interacting with readers and other bloggers - it's great finding people who share similar interests." (Internet Source 7)

From the blogs chosen for my study, Blog 3 is perhaps the most commercial. The author openly invites companies to contact her if they wish to get a product reviewed, and appears to be very active in social media. The blog has 401 followers through Google Friend Connect, 706 through Feedburner, 246 via Bloglovin' and 328 via Twitter, as well as 162 fans on Facebook (the number of followers on March 19, 2013). In addition to product reviews, the author does "outfit of the day" posts, "Monthly Must Reads" posts and posts related to celebrity style, as well as covering certain events she has attended, like conferences and fashion shows. In her profile, the author writes "Comments are my favorite part of blogging and I respond to each and every one <3", which she indeed seems to do.

Blog 4

Blog 4 is a style blog with 3600 registered followers via Google Friend Connect, as well as 2217 followers via Bloglovin (the number of followers on March 19, 2013). In her personal profile, the author describes herself in these words: "Wife. Mommy to a furry child named Zoey. Personal Style Blogger. Collector of shoes. Hoarder of Jewelry. Thanks for stopping by!" (Internet Source 8). Most of the posts on Blog 4 are "outfit of the day" posts, which feature pictures of the author in the clothes she is wearing on that particular day, and fairly little text – the text part is mainly information on brands, and where the reader might find and buy similar pieces. Blog 4 also has "giveaways" (the author gifts readers with products and prizes, usually acquired from the blog's sponsors or business affiliates), and "love lists", where the author provides links to products she especially likes at the moment. In addition to these, Blog 4 features a "Monthly Must Reads" post with links to other people's style blogs. Although the author does not reply to every comment she gets, she does take the time to answer the comments where the reader has asked a question. She also sometimes ends a post with a casual question directed to the readers as a group, such as "What are you up to this weekend?"

All of the four blogs described above are to some extend connected. Three of the authors are a part of the "Monthly Must Reads" circle; only Blog 2 is absent from this group. However, all of the authors appear to share some of the same followers, and some of them read the same blogs. They also sometimes comment on each other's blogs.

One significant quality of new media is that they have somewhat blurred the boundaries between public and private (Baym 2010, 5). Because of this, when studying online material, one always has to consider the questions of privacy and ethics. For example, when conducting her analysis of an online forum focused on eating disorders, Stommel (2008, 8) used pseudonyms for the members' names for ethical reasons. However, as the subject matter of

the blogs used in this study is quite different, and none of the blog authors appear in the texts using their whole name, I do not believe the same sort of discretion is needed in the case of the present study. Additionally, all the blogs included in the study are available for public viewing, and can as such be counted as public domain data; for example Androutsopoulos (2008, 9) only deems it necessary to obtain permission for using log data in the case of private exchanges (such as text-messaging) and webpages with restricted access. However, if an author had requested that their texts not be used without permission, I would have naturally contacted them before using any of their material. None of the photographs posted on the blogs were used as material for the analysis, only text.

4.3 Method of Analysis

Online community is a subject best studied by using an interpretive approach, because it gives depth to the analysis by asserting that "truth is subjective and meanings can be interpreted" (Fernback 1999, 216). A researcher cannot simply label all online groups as communities on the basis of, for example, the amount of messages exchanged in the group each day – she needs to assign meanings to the interactions that take place within the group, and use them to make interpretations about the sense of community experienced by the group members (ibid.). In studying such interactional phenomena as solidarity, support and reciprocity, I consider this kind of qualitative approach to be fruitful.

The analytical method of the thesis is computer-mediated discourse analysis: my goal is to identify discourse patterns that "may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer or to the discourse participants themselves" in CMC data (Herring 2004, 342). As mentioned before, the outline of the research topic developed through a hermeneutic process of examining data and studying the criteria which was set for virtual community by previous research. From the start, certain patterns of communication arose from the data frequently and prominently. These patterns included the practices of sharing inside jokes (Baym 1995),

asking for and giving advice (Kouper 2010), expressing affection (Herring 1994), sharing personal experiences (Tannen 1984) and initiating social network connections (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997).

Looking at previous research, many of these phenomena could be connected to the concepts of solidarity, support and reciprocity. For example, Herring (2004, 356) states that solidarity can be measured through the use of humor, whereas support can be detected in acts of positive politeness and reciprocity in patterns of turn initiation and response. Other research by, for example, Nishimura (2008) and Baym (2010, 82-86) suggests that a sense of support and solidarity can be achieved by exchanging knowledge and sharing experiences, and that frequent reciprocation to messages from others often enhances the feeling of community within a group. Kouper (2010, 3-4) also points out that advice can also been seen as a form of social support, as the process of giving advice includes important interactional features such as face work and politeness.

After establishing that the focus of my study would be on the phenomena that could be interpreted as expressions of solidarity, support and reciprocity, I conducted a close analysis of the features that were used to construct these expressions. These features included politeness indicators such as hedging, indirect questions, partial agreement, apologizing and the use of endearments, as well as contextualization cues like emoticons, capitalization and metadescriptions.

5 Analysis

This chapter consists of the empirical analysis of the material collected form the four style blogs. In the first part of the chapter, I will examine the community-like features that were apparent in the data, and the ways in which these features reflect the criteria for online community defined by previous research. In the second, more in-depth part of the analysis, I

will move on to observe the ways in which solidarity, support and reciprocity are expressed in the four blogs, and discuss how these features might contribute to a feeling of community among the authors and readers of the blogs.

5.1 Style Blogs as Communities: An Overview

If we return to Herring's (2004) criteria for online community introduced in chapter 2, we notice that while all of the listed descriptions could be connected to style blogs, there are some that are more visible in the data than others. Herring (2004, 357) notes that due to the varying circumstances associated with each CMC-based group, some community indicators are more likely to turn out useful to the analysis than others, depending on the data.

In the case of style blogs, criterion 4 on Herring's (2004, 355) list – that is, *criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution* – does not lend itself particularly well to the analysis. Unlike, for example, in Luzón's (2011, 15-16) academic blog data, which exhibited features of anti-social behavior such as flaming or group exclusion, there were not many examples of conflict or criticism between the participants in my data. The most likely reason for this is the topic of discussion around which the interaction revolves; the mutual engagement of the community, in Wenger's (1998, 73-74) terms. In general, conflict does not seem to take place in style and lifestyle related blogs in the same way that it might in blogs dealing with political or societal issues. This might be because the topics are associated with hobbies, and as such are not generally viewed as "serious" enough be a source of conflict, or because style bloggers see their style as an art form, and therefore largely as a matter of taste. This view is supported by Placencia (2012, 302), who reflected that her data from a "beauty and style" themed advice site were likely to exhibit different features than conversations on sites that focused on, for example, relationships or health. Of course, style bloggers can receive criticism because of commercialism, e.g. recommending products that their sponsors have paid for, and occasionally readers can try to provoke the blogger by speaking ill of her

appearance. However, these phenomena did not take place in the four blogs used in the study, which explains why expressions of conflict are practically non-existent. Even though there were some cases were disagreement occurred, dissenting views were expressed politely, as in example (1), where the reader "cushions" her criticism by using a laughing emoticon and partial agreement:

(1) "Just when I'm praising the rain gods for cooler weather, I'm taunted by more heat!"

> Reply by reader:
> "I always find it interesting when ppl complain about heat; while we're getting some snow here now already :D Though I can see how heat all the time can be boring." (Author and commenter on Blog 1, Nov 2)

Other than the conflict-related criterion, all criteria on Herring's (2004, 355) list could be quite easily identified in the data. The first criterion (*active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants*) is apparent both in the fact that the blogs have fairly large amounts of registered followers, and in that each entry gets comments from the readers – some more than others, depending on the subject of the post. Some of the interactions in the comments' section also hint to the fact that the participants know each other from previous online, and in some cases even offline interactions, as is the case in example (2).

(2) "Yay! So fun as always hanging with you Ella – my post went up today too but I took it down as I already had one up! Will publish it tomorrow :)"

> Reply:
> "I had so much fun too – I wrote about our sushi dinner (and how I was alone with the all-you-can-eat dishes LOL) but took it out because the post was getting too long ;-P I'm so glad I have an Express partner-in-crime! Can't wait to read your post tomorrow." (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Nov 14)

The second criterion on Herring's (2004, 355) list – *shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values* – is closely related to Wenger's (1998, 73) definition for a community of practice; the purpose, or mutual engagement of the group is to discuss and share style-related things, as style is the group members' common interest. Notions such as values and history cannot be extensively studied in the scope of this study, but shared culture and norms can perhaps be

detected in, for example, the uses of particular discourse styles and examples of insider lingo (Baym 2010, 77); in example (3), knowledge of terms such as "peplum" or "color blocking" is required, and there is also evidence of other group specific communicative features, such as finishing the message by adding an "xo" (hugs and kisses) and a "signature" (a link to the commenter's own website). These features can also be seen as indicators of Herring's (2004, 355) criterion 5, *self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups*, and of Wenger's (1998, 82-83) concept of a shared repertoire.

(3) "I have always loved Express and so happy to see peplum & color blocking for spring. Looks like a fun night.
xo
LindsayJEveryday.blogspot.com"

Reply:
"It was lots of fun :-) And I'm happy to see peplum is here for a while longer - it's growing on me LOL!" (Comment and Reply on Blog 3, Oct 30)

The last of Herring's (2004, 355) criteria, *emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals*, is also to some extent applicable to style blogs. Although there is not much variation to roles –perhaps the ones of blogger, regular follower and new reader could be identified – it is clear that the author of the blog at which the discussion takes place does hold a position of governance. This blog hierarchy is reflected in example (4):

(4) "(anytime I have a giveaway for my readers, which I know that not everyone that enters is one.. but it's ok, I like to give 48h to hear from the winner to "claim" the prize. I usually wait longer than 48h cuz I'm nice like that. But if the winner doesn't claim the prize, new winner will be selected. And that's what happened this time, in case some of you are wondering....)
xo" (Author on Blog 4, Nov 15)

The person who won the prize has not been in contact with the author, which is why she gives her readers a gentle reminder of the rules. The blogger has promised a prize to a certain person, but she also has the right to take it away if the reader does not obey the rules. Although bloggers have the power to delete comments, ignore requests and set rules, putting too much hierarchical distance between the author and the audience might result in a loss of

readers' interest. This is why governance needs to be constructed carefully and politely; by reminding her readers of the hierarchy, the author performs what Brown and Levinson (1987, 60) refer to as a face-threatening act (FTA) towards her audience, and she therefore needs to add a polite component to her message to save the readers' collective face (Herring 1994, 279). Adding an affectionate "xo" to the message makes it seem friendlier, and less authoritative.

Baym's (2010, 75) community-defining criteria (sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships) also reflect many of the features that could be identified in the blog data. *Interpersonal relationships* were clearly apparent in the way the authors and commenters recognized each other from previous interactions (example (2)), as well as in the way they expressed interest toward each other's lives (cf. section 5.2.2). *Shared identities* could be seen, for example, in the way the participants used inside humor based on their shopping habits to make fun of themselves (cf. section 5.2.1). The concept of *shared practice*, which according to Baym (2010, 77) is visible, for example, in the "distinctive patterns of language use which enact and recreate a cultural ideology that underpins them", was again present in the way the members used language in specific ways, such as in the case of fashion-related terminology (example 5) or acronyms (example 6).

(5) "I love shades of purple and plum for Fall and Winter. Jewel tones are the richest and most regal of shades, and I think they complement darker hair more then pastels do." (Author on Blog 1, Nov 5)

(6) "Of course there are also times when the parcel turns up and you think "WTF was I thinking" but I am glad that this top is an example of the former rather than the latter!" (Author on Blog 2, Nov 9)

Several different ways of expressing *support* were frequent in the data, and will be discussed in more detail in the following sections, especially in section 5.2.2. The only one of Baym's (2010) criteria that was not – at least not explicitly – present in the data was *sense of space*.

This might be because of the network-like quality of blog communities; rather than focusing on one particular webpage, the interactions tend to stretch over several blogs, as the same people read and comment on them.

According to Rheingold (1995, 5) virtual communities on the Internet are formed when "enough people carry on …discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Rheingold (1995, 13) helps us define online community by using the "collective goods" model, coined by a then graduate student at the University of California, Marc Smith. These collective goods can be divided into three categories: social network capital, knowledge capital and communion. As an example of *social network capital*, Rheingold (ibid.) tells us how he, never having met anyone from Tokyo "in the flesh", found a ready-made community there because of his online connections. *Knowledge capital*, on the other hand, can be found in online communities where one can disclose problems and get advice from a collection of people with different areas of expertise. The last type of collective goods, *communion*, is found in the way people offer each other emotional support online, using words to comfort and congratulate.

In the data, social network capital is especially apparent in the examples that hint to the authors and commenters of style blog meeting face-to-face, as in example (7):

(7) "I had so much fun that night with you! We def. need to go back to Bali Hai sooner than later! and we can sneak off during wedding festivities for a cocktail ;)"

Reply:
"Sounds good to me! I have to take nate sometime before then though ;)" (Comment and reply on Blog 1, Oct 17)

Knowledge capital, on the other hand, can be seen in the frequent practice of advice seeking in all four blogs, illustrated in example (8).

(8) Comment on Blog 4, Oct 23:

"Love those velvet pants. I went looking for them and couldn't find them at my Target. Any chance that you have the tag still and could post its DCPI code so I could search for them locally??

Thanks!!!"

Reply by author, Oct 24
"I don't have the tag any longer. If I go to Target this week I'll take a picture of it though."

Reply by reader, Oct 23
"If I make it there and find some, I'll post it as well. Thanks for responding so fast!"

Reply by 2nd reader, Oct 30
"Ok. I got the black and ox blood. The code is 282-04-0710. There's another that is 296548. Are either of those what you need?"

Examples of communion were also found in the data frequently. Rheingold (1995, 19), describes his own experiences of online community by recalling interactions that took place at a parenting-themed discussion group. With time, he formed "strong emotional ties" to the other posters, taking part in the joys and sorrows of their everyday life (ibid.). In style blogs, it turned out, emotional support relating to people's personal experiences is not that common, perhaps because the subject matter is somewhat "lighter" than in the case of Rheingold's parenting peer support group. However, affectionate congratulations and compliments seem to be an essential part of style blog discourse, as we see in example (9).

(9) "I love your style!"

Reply:
"Thanks Jenn :)" (Comment and reply on an entry posted Blog 3 on Nov 7. Comment written on Nov 10, reply on Nov 11.)

In some particular cases expressions of communion extended over the boundaries of style-related discussion, and addressed more general, current themes. When hurricane Sandy caused devastation in the United States in the fall of 2012, the author of Blog 1 expressed her worry for the readers living in the area, as illustrated in example (10):

(10) "Also, I just wanted to express that my thoughts are with those of you on the east coast. I've been watching some of the news coverage on hurricane Sandy, and it looks pretty intense. Stay safe and warm :)" (Author on Blog 1, Oct 31)

To summarize, most of the criteria suggested for online community by Herring (2004), Baym (2010) and Rheingold (1995) were applicable in the case of style blogs. Due to the

topic of discussion that took place in the blogs, expressions denoting conflict and emotional support were rather infrequent, but not completely absent. The interactions tended to take place on several different blogs, which may explain the fact that a concrete sense of space did not come across from the data. However, since a clear majority of the criteria were evident in the interactions, most of the observations can be viewed as supporting the idea that a blog can cultivate practices that make it possible to call it a community.

5.2 Solidarity, Support and Reciprocity in Style Blogs

The second part of the analysis focuses on three topics from Herring's (2004, 355) criteria, solidarity, support and reciprocity, in more detail. In the data, there were certain phenomena that correlated with the three themes, and I have structured the analysis according to them. In the case of solidarity, I examine the ways in which expressions of humor and honesty contribute to a sense of community. For support, the central practices found in the data were those of asking questions and seeking advice, whereas reciprocity was most apparent in different expressions of appraisal, as well as in examples of networking initiative. However, it should be noted that the phenomena are to some extend overlapping; a speech act can be seen as denoting solidarity, support and reciprocity all at the same time. Therefore the construction of the following sections does not rely on a strict outline but rather flexible categories that are designed to make the analysis clearer.

5.2.1 Solidarity: Expressing Humor and Honesty

This section presents examples of solidarity between the participants in the blog data. The most common solidarity-enhancing practices in the blog texts turned out to be joking and other expressions of humor, although statements that signified honesty about, for example, product quality and sponsoring, were also notable.

In her study of a Usenet group "rec.arts.tv.soaps", Baym (1995) found out that humor can be used to create a sense of solidarity and group identity in CMC. Brown and Levinson

(1987, 124) also state that humorous speech and joking can be used in building a sense of community, because shared jokes hint to shared background knowledge and values, and thus can be used in interactions where one wishes to highlight that shared background. Since Wenger (1998, 83) also stresses the importance of a shared repertoire that "reflects the history of mutual engagement", specific ways of using humor that have evolved within the group can also be seen as indicators of a community of practice.

The use of humor appears to be a very common phenomenon in the world of style blogging: the bloggers and readers are well aware of the fact that they buy a lot of things they do not need, and it is quite acceptable to poke fun at the topic. Just as the members of Baym's (1995) soap opera group were fans of the shows but still able to laugh at, for example, the often ridiculous plot developments and bad props used in them, the authors and readers of style blogs seek a feeling of group identity by laughing at the perceived vanity of their hobby.

Several examples of self-deprecating humor could be found in the blogs:

(11) "Oh that kit is so great! I really should pair down my routine LOL! Can't help it though, I'm a product junkie! Those boots look great!" (Comment on Blog 3, Nov 7)

(12) "But there is another, rather more shallow reason for tuning in. I mainly watch because of one of the props that features prominently on the neck of Emily Mortimer. Yes *hangs head* I am obsessed by a necklace." (Author on Blog 2, Oct 21)

(13) "love your outfit and bag! :) though really, when have I ever NOT loved a hot pink bag? LOL ;)" (Comment on Blog 1, Oct 29)

(14) "It would make a nice gift for someone special – I gifted myself which is a very sad reflection on me :)" (Author on Blog 2, Nov 10)

(15) "Those Colin Stuart flats are the stuff dreams are made of. Seriously, I've been looking for gold glitter pointy toe flats since forever. Closet staple, obvi! ;)" (Comment on Blog 4, Nov 8)

Baym (1995), citing Norrick (1993), states that "self-effacing humor serves the self-presentational goal of creating a positive face, for it shows that the speaker has the admired personality trait of being able to laugh at her own shortcomings." Looking at example (15), obviously, "gold glitter pointy toe flats" are not something many people would consider a

"closet staple", but as a fashion lover, this reader wants them anyway. However, she acknowledges the fact that the shoes are far from a necessary purchase by making a joke about it. Humor through self-deprecation is also clearly the goal in example (14), where the author of Blog 2 jokes about being "sad" because she bought a gift for herself. In the data, the use of self-deprecating humor was distributed quite evenly between authors and readers; both parties made fun of themselves consistently.

In the examples of self-effacing humor, there are also hints to what Baym (2010, 77) terms as insider lingo, ways of using particular words and styles that are part of the group's repertoire. Both the authors and readers of style blogs tend to use certain expressions and styles in particular situations. There are uses of fashion-related terminology, such as "flats" (meaning flat-heeled shoes) in example (15) and "kit" (referring to a collection of make-up products) in example (11), as well as acronyms and abbreviations typical of online slang, like "LOL" in example (13) and "obvi" in example (15). Example (12), on the other hand, shows the author using a metadescription (Rheingold 1995, 177) "*hangs head*" to jokingly express her shame at being "obsessed by a necklace".

In these little, subtle ways, words are used to denote humor as well as mark the speech acts as inside jokes best understood by other members of the style blog writing community. Making self-deprecating jokes about shopping habits definitely appeared as a common practice in the data; certain uses of humor had been established as a part of the community's shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83).

Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (2009, 3), who studied the use of self-disclosure humor in conversations between friends, found out that when joking with their friends, especially women were prone to "reveal personal events that they might be less inclined to divulge as part of a more serious conversation". This type of humor can also be seen to enhance solidarity; for example, if one person in a group of friends has made a mistake, others in the

group might share stories of their own embarrassing, past mistakes to break the ice and to protect their friend's face (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 2009, 23). Tannen (1984, 79-81) observed a similar phenomenon in her analysis of conversation among friends; some of the speakers used a communication strategy where a personal statement is followed by a response where the hearer also discloses something personal about herself. Tannen (ibid.), who terms this conversational device as "mutual revelation", identifies it as a way of building camaraderie and rapport.

Examples of this kind of humorous self-disclosure turned out to be quite common in the blog data; an author might reveal something less than flattering about herself, seemingly saying to her readers "I am imperfect and human, and I do silly things, just like you". These self-revelations were rather often related to topics such as health, grooming or diet, as illustrated by the following examples (16)-(18).

(16) "I am feeling drab so it's off to the bathroom o fake tan and then to bed where it will all come off on the sheets...story of my life! ☺" (Author on Blog 2, Nov 13)

(17) "Have a happy Friday all! I am off to stuff my face at an afternoon tea...bring on the scones, clotted cream and cakes! :)" (Author on Blog 2, Nov 9)

(18) "Question of the month: What did you eat today? Nothing healthy, yet!" (Author on Blog 4, Oct 31)

Based on the carefully selected pictures displaying beautiful and often expensive clothes, an author of a style blog can seem difficult to identify with. By telling how she makes a mess when applying fake tan (16), and likes to "stuff her face" with cakes and scones (17), the author of Blog 2 makes herself more relatable to her readers, and shows that all the compliments she receives on a daily basis have not made her too proud; she is one member in a group of friends, as opposed to a distant idol. The author uses positive politeness, making herself "the same" as her readers, and in this way marking them as members of the same in-group (Brown and Levinson 1987, 70). In example (18), the author of Blog 4 uses the same tactic, answering the question of the month with a self-deprecating joke. Since the readers'

ability to identify with the author often seems to be somewhat connected to their activity in the community, these little stories that make the author more relatable also further the joint enterprise of the community (Wenger 1998, 77-79).

Interestingly, Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (2009, 26) believe that the use of self-disclosure humor "depends…strongly on friendship", and therefore would not take place in the same way in artificially composed groups – a belief that lends more support to the idea that blogs can develop into online communities whose members share personal and emotional connections similar to those associated with "real life" communities. Garton et al. (1999, 79-81), who used social network analysis as an approach to analyzing online communication, state that social actors are connected by different ties of varying strengths. Although many people would assume online relationships to consist of mainly "weak" ties that are "infrequently maintained, nonintimate connections", self-disclosure is one of the characteristics that usually only takes place in relationships that can be classified as strong ties, such as in the interactions between close friends or colleagues (ibid.).

Because online communities lack the non-verbal signals of joking, such as facial expressions or a teasing tone of voice, emoticons – particularly the winking smiley face – are commonly used as markers of humor. By using emoticons, misunderstandings are avoided in situations that would normally require a non-verbal component for the statement to be understood as humorous (Baym 1998, 61). Emoticons can be therefore used as what Gumperz (1982, 131) termed as contextualization cues; because a smiling emoticon is a rather universally known marker of humor, even a person from a different socio-cultural background will most likely identify the statement as a joke, even though she would not necessary do so purely on the basis of textual cues.

Although positive emoticons were used very frequently in the data, negative ones hardly appeared at all. There were a couple of occasions where the "frowny face" emoticon appeared, but even then, the intent seemed to be at least to some extent humorous:

(19) "ahhh I love those pants!!
I need some :(" (Comment on Blog 4, Nov 1)

In example (19) the frowning face indicates petulance more than actual sadness. (For more information on the use of emoticons, see for example Dresner and Herring, 2010.)

Irony and sarcasm were also used in some cases, although not nearly as frequently as self-effacing and self-disclosure humor. In some instances, however, irony was used as a device for creating self-effacing humor, as is the case in example (21).

(20) "Well, who knew that friends and family really IS just for friends and family? Imagine that." (Author on Blog 1, Oct 26)

(21) "I keep eyeing them up online, dreaming of cosy evenings and forgetting about that whole commuting to and from work in the dark thing I used to "enjoy"." (Author on Blog 2, Oct 30)

Although defining irony, and in some cases even separating ironic statements form non-ironic statements, is difficult, in most spoken occurrences irony is created by using extra-linguistic devices (Tannen 1984, 130-131). In a face-to-face interaction, the irony might, for example, be marked by a difference in tone or pitch – in the case of example (20), with the stress on the word "is". Because the audience cannot hear the author's actual voice, she has to think of another way to stress the word; here, it is done by capitalization. Compensating for the lack of extra-linguistic cues can be tricky, especially when expressing humor, and requires some innovation from the participants. In example (21), by putting the word "enjoy" in quotation marks the author signals that the term is to be interpreted sarcastically.

Despite the fact that the use of emoticons in my style blog data was frequent, humor could also be signaled by verbal expressions denoting laughter, as in the case of example (22):

(22) "I have always had a pretty intense love for a good bag. I would definitely choose a bag over shoes which is weird. I mean, you need shoes right? Perhaps my priorities need to be re-evaluated? haha"(Comment on Blog 4, Nov 8)

The use of these types of contextualization cues in online communication appears to be a rather common practice in various different CMC environments. Werry (1996, 57), who studied the interactional features of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), noted that among the participants, there had evolved a system of innovative linguistic devices to compensate for missing extra-linguistic cues; for example, reduplicated letters could be used to denote a drawn-out intonation, and periods and hyphens to create pauses. Rheingold (1995, 177) also observed similar innovative phenomena in the interaction between IRC users, who used words to "reconstruct contexts in their own image, adding imagined actions…as metadescriptions to the running dialogue". Werry (1996, 59-60) also points out the same phenomenon, referring to it as "symbolic enactment of physical actions" (such as kissing, hugging or raising glasses).

In style blogs, the most innovative ways of compensating for tone when stressing the humorous side of the statement were, for example, the use of italics (23) and ending each word in the statement with a full stop (24):

(23) "*Clearly* time to wipe down the mirror, I see..." (Author on Blog 1, Nov 5)

(24) "I hate every one of you girls that scored that sweater. Every.one.of.you.
Okay, maybe not really, but I still can't believe I couldn't track that one down! I love it on you!" (Comment on Blog 1, Oct 29)

The use of Rheingold's (1995, 177) metadiscriptions as a way of making up for the lack of extra-linguistic cues also made several appearances, exemplified in (25) and (26):

(25) "(closes eyes, ponders Mango)" (Author on Blog 2, Oct 30)

(26) "Holy moly, the second photo doesn't even look real! What an insane view. But I'm still insanely jealous of you going to Hawaii next year–nothing can compare to that, no way. *sighs happily*" (Comment written on Oct 21 to an entry posted on Oct 17 on Blog 1)

The various different uses of these types of contextualization cues that identify statements as humorous make it all the more clear that humor is a significant part of style blogging, and that the participants consider it important that others in the group "get" their joke.

In fact, it would appear that humor is a big part of what ensures an online community's continued popularity. In studying the Usenet group focused on soap operas, Baym (1995) discovered that humorous posts were especially popular among the readers – humor was a sign of quality in a post. Witty, humorous writing is also something a blogger often strives for, as it is appreciated by the readers – this was evidenced in the data by comments such as the one in example (27):

(27) "You do make me chuckle :)" (Comment on Blog 2, Nov 1)

Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997), who studied interactivity in online groups, also noticed a link between humor and interactivity; humorous messages were more likely to appear in interactive situations between different participants. Thus, humorous style of writing also seems to encourage reciprocation, since the author's example may prompt the readers to use more humor in their own comments as well. In example (28), a reader jokingly teases the author of Blog 2, who has complained in her post that she would love to buy some jumpers for the winter, but has no use for them since she lives in Dubai:

(28) "Come back to Seattle, we've got PLENTY of rain for you to wear jeans and sweatshirts :) haha." (Comment on Blog 2, Oct 30)

According to Baym (1995) the use of humor can indeed be a "way in which participants connect to one another and create the group's social environment". Humor also "serves as a means of creating individuality when the cues we use to define ourselves in face-to-face groups are unavailable" (ibid.). Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (2009, 11-13) also noted that in their data of conversations between friends, self-revelation humor was used as entertainment, for example in a humorous narration of a strange dream. Humor therefore seems to have several

important functions in maintaining a sense of community, expressing solidarity being only one of them.

In addition to expressions of humor, an atmosphere of solidarity was created in the blogs by frequent use of speech acts denoting honesty. In fact, although style blogging can at first sight seem like an endless list of brands and stores the author loves, being honest about product quality with one's readers seems to be an important part of the blogging culture. Just like in the case of humorous self-disclosure, being frank about negative experiences as well as the positive ones acts as building material for solidarity and trust, as illustrated by examples (29)-(32).

(29) "It's one of those blazers that actually feels like decent value for money – and that's not always the case in Topshop." (Author on Blog 2, Nov 13)

(30) "The shoes are good for a short period of wear lol. I'm not gonna lie, my feet did hurt by the end of the night!" (Author on Blog 1, Oct 15)

(31) "A word of warning about the deep V...I have hardly any boobage and yet I found myself looking down quite a lot to see if I was over-exposing myself, it's deeeeep. So if you have a good size chest and don't want people to perve...well, don't say I didn't warn you!" (Author on Blog 2, Oct 27)

(32) "This wash is SLS free, yet foams up nicely. The Ginger & White Tea smell is divine BUT sadly not long-lasting. By the time I apply moisturizer I can no longer smell it on my skin." (Author on Blog 3, Nov 5)

In these examples of the authors honestly recounting experiences about different brands and products, one can easily identify similar solidarity building features that were present in expressions of humor, such as insider lingo (Baym 2010, 77), e.g. presumed knowledge of the brand Topshop (29) or familiarity with skincare terminology such as "SLS free" (32), self-disclosure (31) and indeed the use of humor itself (30).

The author's honesty can also encourage a reader to express her honest opinion as well. Even though the unwritten rule of style blogging seems to be "never say anything outright negative about another's outfit", the author's frankness creates an atmosphere of trust that enables the readers to speak their mind as well, as they have done in examples (33)-(35).

(33) "I love this blazer but I can't justify paying that price." (Comment on Blog 2, Nov 13)

(34) "fyi -
the tory burch calista boot runs super small in the calves! hope that helps!
xo,
Lindsay" (Comment written on Nov 9 to an entry posted on Blog 4 on Nov 8)

(35) "LOVE the sparkly black dress, the light dress next to it with the gold bow belt and the black and white dress. However those models are far, far too thin for my personal tastes. It puts me off the clothes. (…)" (Comment on Blog 3, Oct 30)

As noted by Wenger (1998, 78), just because a community has a mutual engagement and a joint enterprise, it does not mean that disagreement within the group should not exist. On the contrary, in some cases disagreement can even be a "productive part of the enterprise" (ibid.). In my data, solidarity was not maintained by a harmony of opinions, but by the trust between participants that enabled them to politely express their honest opinion. Although the readers in examples (33)-(35) show disagreement in their comments, they maintain and atmosphere of friendliness by integrating advice into the criticism ("hope that helps" in example (34)), or using partial agreement (examples (33) and (35)).

Many of the style blog authors have sponsors, who invite bloggers to events and give them free products on the condition that the blogger writes about it, and thus advertises the sponsor. It is part of the blog etiquette to mention when the product reviewed is a sponsored one.

(36) "As always – when I review a free item, I consider it as if I paid the retail price...and evaluate it objectively. Gifted or not, I blog to share my true feelings and help my readers." (Author on Blog 3, Nov 5)

(37) "This is a Sponsored post written by me on behalf of Express Canada for SocialSpark. All opinions are 100% mine." (Author on Blog 3, Nov 14)

In examples (36) and (37), the author lets her readers know that even though the post is sponsored, she stands by her own words about the product. Wanting to be honest about the sponsoring can be seen as a sign of solidarity between the author and her audience, as by reassuring the readers that the sponsoring has not affected her opinions the author

acknowledges the fact that her followers trust her judgment. Mutual honesty between the members also advances the group's joint enterprise (Wenger 1998, 77-79); the participants look to each other for style and fashion related knowledge, which makes sincere, helpful product reviews important.

To summarize, the authors and readers who participated in the discussions that took place in the blog data used humor as a way of building solidarity and marking each other as members of the same group. A shared interest in style was expressed through sometimes self-deprecating humorous statements, and in-group rapport was built through humorous self-disclosure. In situations where extra-linguistic cues would normally be needed to denote humor, the participants compensated by using computer-mediated contextualization cues, such as emoticons, to make it clear that the statement was meant to be a joking one. Honesty about product quality, humorous or not, was used by the authors to create a trusting atmosphere, and it seemed to encourage the readers to express their personal opinions more freely.

Based on my observations, humorous statements and expressions of honesty can be identified as important community-building devices in the realm of style blogs; they highlight the community's mutual engagement (fashion centric inside jokes), promote its joint enterprise (being honest about negative product experiences and sponsoring) and convey togetherness by expressing a shared repertoire (the genre specific use of fashion terminology and acronyms, the use of emoticons and other online contextualization cues). (Wenger 1998, 73-83.)

5.2.2 Support: Asking Questions and Seeking Advice

This section deals with the way the participants expressed support in the blog data. Although several varieties of supportive intent were apparent in the interactions between the group

members, the most common ways of showing support were found in the practices of making requests and seeking for or giving advice.

According to Baym (2010, 83), support is one of the defining characteristics of community, and especially non-material, emotional and social forms of support are commonly expressed also in online interactions. As Hampton and Wellman (2002, 368) point out, CMC has the potential to both reinforce already existing supportive networks, and to create new spaces for it, "encouraging support where none may have existed before". Although virtual communities designed specifically for the task of acting as support groups exist, they are not the only online environments that can offer various forms of support (Wellman and Gulia 1999, 173). Because they usually have members with different areas of expertise, in possession of different information, a virtual community can be the equivalent of a "living encyclopedia" (Rheingold 1995, 57).

There are several different kinds of support that can strengthen the feeling of community within an online group. Firstly, *social integration or network support* is achieved through the expression of common interests for "social and recreational purposes". Then there is *esteem support*, which comes from receiving positive feedback, and can better the participant's self-acceptance or self-esteem. Lastly, *informational support* is exemplified in the process of giving advice. (Baym 2010, 83-84). In the blog data, the latter type of support turned out to be the most common example. If we consider style blogs as communities of practice, this is not surprising – sharing insights, information and advice are, according to Wenger et al. (2002, 4) an essential part of the interactions that take place in these types of communities.

Requesting information and advice is thus a very common phenomenon in the comments sections of style blogs. Most of the questions in the data were strictly fashion related – information on where the author found the item of clothing, do they still sell it, how

much did it cost etc. – but sometimes they could be quite personal, and as such require some face work. According to Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, 397), effective advice necessitates "message elements that influence perceptions of face threat". Although supportive in intent, the practices of asking questions and seeking advice may have some negative interpretations; questions can be seen as violating privacy, while unsolicited advice and suggestions may imply insult to the hearer's autonomy, and criticism of her choices (Burleson and MacGeorge 2002, 401).

In analyzing examples of informational support that took place in the data, it became apparent that politeness and face maintenance were an important part of these interactions. Positive politeness strategies incorporate compliments and expressions of solidarity into advice, thus minding the hearer's positive face, whilst negative politeness can be used to flatter the negative face by, for example, being pessimistic and uncertain about the hearer responding to a request (Burleson and MacGeorge 2002, 398). For example, a request for personal information could be interpreted by the author as a "taboo topic", and therefore a violation towards her positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987, 66-67). The commenter has to think carefully about how to approach the author with a question that could seem intrusive.

(38) "Hi Laura,
Really strange question here but that top is really sheer and although I love those style tops as well and have some, underwear underneath is really tricky and from your pictures your bra isn't at all visible.
Can you suggest a brand you use?
Thanks,
Sarah" (Comment on Blog 2, Nov 9)

(39) "Girl, your tanned, real or fake?..so jealous...makes me wann go on vacation!
jezzdallasmakeup.blogspot.com

Reply
"FAKE! I will tell you what it is in an upcoming post but its about 70% from a bottle that I got in boots ;) haha" (Comment and reply on Blog 2, Nov 3)

(40) "Every outfit looks great, Ella! Thanks for the styling tips! :)

> I have one questions though.....the reason I stay away from white jeans/pants is I hate seeing the whiter shadow of extra seam and pocket fabrics. Is this something you just have to live with when wearing white bottoms or do you have a tip for eliminating this? Thanks!"
>
> Reply:
> "Hi Lindsay! I know what you mean about everything being more apparent under white pants- I think if you find a pair made of thicker material, the seams won't be apparent... And it's one of those things where it is more noticeable to us (as wearers) than anybody else lol!" (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Oct 24)

As illustrated by examples (38)–(40), the requests for advice usually include some form of politeness strategy. Thanking in advance was common in these situations, as well as complimenting the author – "every outfit looks great" (40), "so jealous [of your tan]" (39), and so on. Supportive intent in the process of advice giving and seeking therefore seems to be a mutual process: in exchange for the informational support the commenter has requested, she offers esteem support by complimenting the author (Baym 2010, 83-84). In her study of peer advice in a LiveJournal community, Kouper (2010, 9) noticed the same sort of phenomenon; the participants showed appreciation in advance when they wished to get advice from the other group members.

Indirectness and hedging were popular ways of making requests more supportive and polite in the blog data. Questions were rarely asked bald on record (Brown and Levinson 1987, 94-95), and rather indirectly; for example, in example (38), the reader forms her question as "Can you suggest a brand to use…" instead of asking "What brand do you use?".

(41) "Is that a wedding ring on your finger Miss Laura?"

> Reply by 2nd reader:
> "Lol! I was trying to guess to! Im using my ipad to view this page and even by zooming in on her finger I cant quite make out if I wedding band, engagement ring or just a regular ring;(lets hope Laura replies;)" (Comments on Blog 2, Oct 27)

(42) "LOVE!!! I love that trench, would you mind me asking how tall you are? I buy shorts in pants but have never bought petite, thinking I might need to."

> Reply:
> "I don't mind you asking at all! I am 5'2 :) Sleeve length is always an issue for me. This petite sized coat is the perfect length! Not too long, not too short. If you are under 5'4, I'd go for petite!" (Comment and reply on Blog 1, Nov 12)

Size is a sensitive subject, especially for women. As the process of requesting advice can in itself be seen as a face-threatening act (Herring 1994, 279), when the subject matter of the question is this personal, the participant who is asking for advice has to thread carefully. In example (42), the reader makes the personal question about the author's height acceptable by first satisfying the author's positive face by expressing her admiration for the coat (Brown and Levinson 1987, 63), after which she rationalizes her curiosity by explaining that she is quite short herself, and would like some advice on the sizing for the jacket – a strategy that Kouper (2010, 13) refers to as justification of the request. To sound more polite, the reader also uses hedging (Brown and Levinson 1987, 145), beginning her request with "would you mind me asking", instead of just making a straightforward question about the author's height. The reader hedges to show that she does not assume the author to be willing or able to answer her question, which flatters the author's negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987, 146).

Being pessimistic about the possibility of the hearer agreeing to the act the speaker wishes to complete is therefore a way of showing negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987, 173-175). Here, the reader's politeness strategy turns out to be successful, because the author provides her with the advice she has requested, highlighting that it is acceptable for the reader to have asked the question both in words ("I don't mind you asking at all") and by using a friendly emoticon. However, in some cases the speech act of requesting for information is unsuccessful and this kind of cooperation does not take place – note that the author of Blog 2 refrained from addressing the inquiries about her wedding ring in example (41). Although some style bloggers divulge a lot of information about their personal lives and relationships in their blogs, many obviously wish to keep their privacy when it comes to these aspects of life.

"Where did you get it?" is probably the most common question asked in the comments section. Often this question is accompanied by a compliment, showing that the reader admires the blogger's taste in clothing and would therefore like to acquire something similar to her own wardrobe.

(43) "P.S. – where is that wide belt from? Love it!"

Reply:
"It's from J. Crew. I think I got it last winter but I did see one similar to it not too long ago."
(Comment and reply on Blog 4, Nov 14)

By saying that even though the belt is old, but there might be a similar piece in store at the moment, the author gives the reader their support for "copying" the look in example (43). Even if the author cannot directly solve the reader's dilemma, they often offer other possible choices in their reply, as illustrated by example (44).

(44) "Where is the shirt your wearing from? I love it! I have a pair of rocketdog flats I bought from TJ Maxx for $10 in black and I wanted some brown ones so I bought some at Rack Room I think...I'm on my third pair of brown/bronze (they stopped making just brown) and that black pair I bought for less than half the money still looks the best."

Reply:

"Thank you, the blouse is from nordstrom by bellatrix. They unfortunately don't have the same one, but they have other cute options with the same look." (Comment and reply on Blog 1, Oct 17)

Sometimes it happens that a reader's inquiry is not all that easily satisfied, as is apparent in the conversation in example (45):

(45) "What brand is that Target sweater? Mossimo? Very cute!" (Comment on Blog 4, Nov 14)

Replies:

Author (Nov 15)
"It is mossimo :)"

Reader (Nov 16)

"Hi Lilly,

> Can you please tell me if you got that sweater at Target in-store or online? I went looking today and no one in the ladies section of my Target had seen it. : (“
>
> Author (Nov 16)
> “I bought it in store about 10 days ago. They seem to be pretty new in stock, at least at my local store.”
>
> Reader (Nov 16)
> “Thank you so much Lilly. I will check another Target and see if I can find it. Really love the pattern. Love your style, by the way. :)”
>
> Reader (Nov 17)
> “Lilly, I hate to be a PITA, but I’ve checked a few Targets now and no one recognizes the sweater. Is it “black label” Mossimo or Mossimo Supply Company? The lady at my target asked if you still had the tag with the DPC number on it and I said that was probably pushing it! : D”
>
> Author (Nov 17)
> “Michelle, the black/white cardigan is Xhilaration (the gray long one is Mossimo). My bad :0
> I still don’t see it online. Glad I still have the tag though. The DPC # is: 9282031947 I checked my local target again and they only had one left, in this color, and it was XL :/”
> (Discussion between the author and a commenter on Blog 4, in an entry posted on Nov 14.)

The above discussion is an interesting example of supportive information exchange between a reader and a blogger. The traditional inquiry about the origin (in this case, brand) of the product has been made and answered, but the reader continues to have problems finding the item. The FTA towards the author’s negative face can be seen as increasing as the reader asks more questions, and to minimize the imposition the reader begins to use a negative politeness strategy of being pessimistic: her first question is bald on record (“What brand is that Target sweater?), but the second one is more carefully constructed (“Can you please tell me…”). In her last comment, Michelle confesses that despite having tried, she has yet to locate the sweater. She apologizes for her FTA (yet another question) in advance by beginning with a phrase that indicates her reluctance to continue to bother the author (Brown and Levinson 1987, 188): “Lilly, I hate to be a PITA” (‘pain in the ass’). To complete her face-saving act the reader addresses the author in a friendly way, by name – according to Brown and

Levinson (1987, 107), using the hearer's first name in a familiar way can act as an "in-group identity marker" that aims to flatter the hearer's positive face by hinting to a close relationship between the participants.[1] The face-saving is repeated in the last sentence of the comment, where she makes an off-record request (Brown and Levinson 1987, 69) for the DPC number, at the same time acknowledging that asking for it up-front would be "pushing it", and ends with a laughing emoticon to contextualize, showing that the situation is not really all that serious. By admitting that the mix-up with the brands was her fault ("My bad :o"), and providing the reader with both the DPC number and the storage information of her local store, the author restores balance to the relationship.

As Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, 401) point out, when the processes of asking questions and giving advice are clearly supportive in intent, and teamed with the right amount of face work, what results is a "supportive conversational environment" (cited from Burleson and Goldsmith 1998), where open discussions of potentially face-threatening matters between the participants are made possible – something that seems rather essential in a community.

Even though the readers ask a lot of questions from the authors, the practice of advice seeking works both ways. The blogger is not the ultimate authority when it comes to all things style-related – in fact, sometimes it is the author of a blog that turns to her reader(s) for help:

(46) "If you have any top tips product wise let us all know in the comments below – I can't be the only one that looks to blogs for a bit of direction and guidance – so what's your very favourite product that you would recommend?" (Author on Blog 2, Oct 19)

(47) "Do you like wearing blazers? Do you own white jeans? I'm still trying to figure out if I can wear them in colder weather - any pairing suggestions for fall are very welcome!" (Author on Blog 3, Oct 24)

(48) "Do you have any other recommendations from EH? Would love to find out more about her line so a big yes to the blogpost please :)" (Author on Blog 2, Oct 19)

[1] This also applies in situations where affectionate nicknames, such as "hon", "gorgeous" or "sweetie" are used.

It is interesting to notice that when the authors ask the readers for help, their questions, while certainly friendly, tend to be more on record and less concerned with politeness than the questions from the readers. In examples (46) – (48), the authors form rather straightforward questions directed at the readers, rather than using hedging or other politeness strategies. This might be connected to the specific roles that the participants have in the interaction – according to Brown and Levinson (1987, 78-79), power relations can factor in to the choosing of a communication strategy. Although many of the readers of style blogs also write their own blogs, there is always an asymmetrical relationship between the commenters and the author of the blog where the conversation takes place. Thus, the author's position of power might make her worry less about threatening the other participants' face: making a request in one's own blog may not feel like something that would inconvenience the other participants, but the same author might consider the situation to be different, were she to seek advice from someone else's blog (Brown and Levinson 1987, 228). This sort of evidence of a hierarchy, as we learned from Herring's (2004, 355) criteria, is often a part of an online community's structure.

Readers can also give advice to one another, like in these discussions about coffee (49) and oatmeal (50):

(49) "I miss the pumpkin spice lattes, no caffeine for me this year but next year I'll be all over those babies!"

Reply by 2nd reader:
"You can probably ask for it caffeine free!!"

Reply by 3rd reader:
"or the chai version :)
I don't do caffeine and that is what I usually drink!" (Comments on Blog 4, Oct 31)

(50) "I had gluten free oatmeal with almond milk, cinnamon, coconut and sliced bananas. I also had scrambled eggs with spicy cauliflower and salsa. Now, I'm sipping on some hot ginger lemon water with cayenne pepper :)"

Reply by 2nd reader:
"@Leena, where do you find gluten free oatmeal? Is it yummy? I'm paleo and i <3 oatmeal!"

Reply by first reader:
"I buy bobs red mill gf oats from vitacost.com. It tastes the same to me!" (Comments on Blog 4, Oct 31)

The practice of supportive, interactive advice seeking and giving is illustrated especially well in the example (51), where the author of Blog 1 has disclosed some details of her diet, and asks the audience for some help to better it.

(51) "What does your typical day look like? Any tips for healthy eating on the go? I drive a lot for work, so my food has to be portable."

Reply by reader:
"Hi gorgeous! Your diet sounds great! I eat like a horse haha!! I've found that the more protein I eat in the morning, the less I eat the rest of the day.
Happy Halloween :)
XO Alex"
Reply by 2nd reader:
"I've found the SAME thing...if I have carbs for breakfast I tend to eat badly the rest of the day, but if I can have protein in the morning, I make healthier choices for the rest of the day!

Your eating plan sounds really healthy and on-track!
I've read a lot of healthy-eating-on-the-go tips – but none of them sound that appetizing to me (oatmeal, smoothies, salads etc – I like them fresh, not after they've been sitting out for a while)...if I do find anything yummy and easy I'll let you know for sure – not that you need them – you're doing such a good job!"

Reply by author:
"Thank you :) lol, I just had candy and frozen yogurt on this fine Halloween night! Not so good for my waistline! I think I'll try eating more protein in the morning like you and Alex suggested." (Author and comments on Blog 1, Oct 31)

Here, the readers show solidarity by sharing their own experiences, as well as expressing esteem support (Baym 2010, 83-84) by adding positive feedback to the advice. The sharing of personal experiences seems to be an important part of giving peer support in an online community; in Kouper's (2010, 10-11) study of advice giving in a LiveJournal community, she found out that advice based on own experiences was one of the most popular advice giving strategies. By telling about their similar experiences, the people who give advice

identify themselves as "concerned peers", creating solidarity and support between themselves and the ones they offer advice to (Morrow 2012, 271). In this example, the advice from the readers is well-received: the author acknowledges the tips in her answer, and responds to the positive feedback both by traditional thanking and using self-deprecating humor.

Sometimes an author offers advice to the readers in her posts, even if the advice is not requested, as illustrated by examples (52)-(55):

(52) "For work dresses I HIGHLY recommend you check out Dorothy Perkins – I haven't shopped there in years but have noticed a subtle shift in the designs they have churned out in recent seasons so a big round of applause to their design team that are taking some not so subtle clues from the likes of Roland Mouret." (Author on Blog 2, Oct 21)

(53) "If you are looking for inexpensive sweaters Target has been having some amazing ones. Love me some Tar-jay." (Author on Blog 4, Nov 15)

(54) "The double layered chiffon peplum flows and moves as you do and whilst it is sheer it's not one of those tops that requires a vest/cami underneath. A nude bra will suffice because the front pleats hide a lot of the nakedness." (Author on Blog 2, Nov 9)

(55) "I appreciate that this is not going to work for those living in the Northern Hemisphere but Topshop have this in their sale and there are rumours that it's been reduced to £10 in stores...so at that price I think you could almost justify an early summer 2013 purchase :)

If you do buy this though please be aware that the arms are cut deep and the waist pretty snug. I bought my regular size but these are two design traits that I noticed immediately."(Author on Blog 2, Nov 3)

In these examples of advice giving, as in the humorous statements discussed in the previous section, there are also many components that hint to the community's shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83). It is clear that these are examples of advice distributed within a particular in-group; the advisors know that when they mention Dorothy Perkins and Roland Mouret (52), or talk about a "double layered chiffon peplum" (54), the audience knows what they are referring to. The joke about justifying buying summer clothes in November in example (55) and the playful reference to the brand "Target" as "Tar-jay" in (53) are also characteristic of style blog communication. These types of cues highlight the fact that the

advice is meant to be a friendly, supportive act between people who are of the same group, contributing to the "supportive conversational environment" mentioned by Burleson and MacGeorge (2002, 401).

A reader can also give unrequested or unintentional advice, like in example (64) where the appropriateness of the use of the word "oxblood" when describing a color is discussed:

(56) "Oxblood creeps me out too..LOL ..it is the name of a white supremacist band. (the term dates back to killing of Jews) – I only know this because of that trial I worked on!"

Reply from the author:
"Oh dear! That makes it official for me then – I am not using that word!" (Comment and reply on Blog 1, Oct 24)

In example (56) the reader gives the author informational support based on her experience in working in law, offering advice in the form of what Rheingold (1995, 13) refers to as knowledge capital. By adding a humorous element ("LOL") and treating the piece of information as something not many people are aware of ("I only know this because…"), the reader avoids threatening the author's face and her act of giving advice remains supportive.

It is a common practice for an author to end a post with a question, to give the readers an idea of what to comment on and to get the conversation going. In fact, it often happens that the question is not even a style-related one: the author can, for example, inquire about the readers' plans for the weekend, or about something to do with current events – a wide range of different questions were present in the data, as we can see in examples (57)-(60). These inquiries can be seen as a form of what Baym (2010, 83-84) calls social integration or network support; they might help the readers feel more on the same wavelength as the author, and encourage them to share their own experiences related to the subject of conversation.

(57) "Hello lovelies! Can you all believe it's already last day of October, my favorite month!?! Sometimes I wish the time would slow down a bit...go slooooower (not during the work hours of course, that needs to speed up). Any of you out-there like snow?" (Author on Blog 4, Oct 31)

(58) "How do you go from day to night?" (Author on Blog 1, Oct 24)

(59) “What have you eaten today – please share – I’m so curious!!!” (Author on Blog 3, Oct 31)

(60) “Hope your Monday was a good one! I thought I’d post this before I go to bed....but realized it’s not even 7pm yet. It feels so late.... Anyone else not a fan of the time change?” (Author on Blog 4, Nov 5)

Usually, at least some of the readers acknowledge the question in their own comments:

(As reply to the author’s question considering plans for the weekend)

(61) “Great outfit. Love the cozy sweater. My husband and I have a date night planned tonight :).
Agi:)
Vodkainfusedlemonade.wordpress.com”

Reply by author:
“Aw nice. :) have a good time.” (Comment and reply on Blog 4, Nov 3)

According to Luzón (2011, 14), asking questions can act as a way of creating a sense of intimacy between the blogger and the readers. Inquiring about and recounting details not directly related to the subject matter of the blog makes the exchanges seem more personal, and more akin to interactions that take place in face to face friendship. In example (61), the fact that the author responds to the comment (although she strictly speaking is not required to) with an affectionate “aw” and wishes that the reader has a good time lends support to the notion that the participants’ of the community are genuinely interested in each other’s lives.

(62) “Haha, I hate the time change! It’s nice to get an extra hour of sleep, but now it’s dark by 5! How are we supposed to take pictures? The lighting is going to be more difficult to work with.

Anyway, I love this outfit! That jacket fits you perfectly. I also love the leopard scarf with the striped tee. I’m really enjoying that combo myself. And the shoes are so pretty!“

Reply:
“Hah so true. The other day hubby was waiting on me to take outfit pictures and kept saying “hurry, we’re losing light, we’re losing light” haha”
(Comment and Reply on Blog 4, Nov 5)

The exchange in example (62) is intriguing, because the interaction started about a general subject not connected to style blogging – the time change – but Beautygirl24 turned it into a

related phenomenon in her comment, drawing attention to the practical problems the time change causes for bloggers (i.e. the lack of light in the evening). From Lilly's reply, it becomes clear that they share the same problem, which also highlights their shared identity as style bloggers. So, the idea of being "of the same group" is constantly present, even when the original topic of discussion does not directly relate to the mutual engagement of the community (Wenger 1998, 73-74).

It is also rather common for the readers to request that the blogger write about certain things. While the author is located at the top of the hierarchy when the conversation takes place in her own blog, and has ultimate control over the content, keeping the readers interested and making them feel involved in the community is vital for the blog's joint enterprise (Wenger 1998, 77-79), and hence its continued existence. Because of this, these requests are usually at least acknowledged by the author, as is the case in examples (63) and (64).

(63) "I have received requests to show my jewellery collection and I thought this would be a good post to give you an insight." (Author on Blog 2, Nov 10th)

(64) "I get a lot of questions about my Old Navy boots – I bought them last year in cognac & black (see this year's version here) – I waited for a promo and ended up getting them both for around $30 each! They have waded through rain and snow – and are still going strong. I was excited to see the sleek cognac boot they came out with this year – and didn't hesitate to order them with a 25% off code (ONMAPLE25 in Canada – code expires today). Hope I get as much wear out of them as I have with my current 2 pairs." (Author on Blog 3, Nov 7)

The author herself can also encourage the readers to make these requests in her blog texts, asking them to participate so that she knows what type of content people would like to read, as the author of Blog 1 does in example (65).

(65) "If you would like to see any swatches or reviews on anything, please let me know. Just give me about a week or so to test these beauties out!" (Author on Blog 1, Nov 8)

Based on the data, the participants expressed all of the three different varieties of support distinguished by Baym (2010, 83-84). Esteem support was apparent in the

interactions where a member of the group received positive feedback from others concerning, for example, her style or diet. Social integration or network support was also featured, most notably in the way the authors engaged readers in conversation by asking for their opinion and showing an interest in their lives. However, the most common form of support in the data was definitely informational support; it appears that asking for advice, as well as answering to these requests, makes up a substantial part of the interactions that take place between the participants in a blog community. In fact, the processes that revolve around the concept of advice could be interpreted as a key part of what Wenger (1998, 77-79) termed a community's joint enterprise – the members of the group constantly help each other solve problems and locate items, taking part in their hobby as a collective. It is also interesting how there seem to be fixed ways of performing these interactions; choosing speech acts that contain a suitable amount of the right kind of politeness appears to have become a part of the shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83) between the bloggers and their followers.

The abundance of supportive exchanges that took place in the blogs I studied also hints to the fact that the group members share what Garton et al. (1999, 80-81) refer to as broad, multiplex ties – these ties are based on several different relations between the participants, for example sharing information (example (56)), offering emotional support (example (51)) and taking part in the same recreational activities (example (62)). It is noteworthy that these types of intimate and supportive ties are visible in the interactions within an online group, because multiplex ties are often thought of as impossible to maintain via online relationships (Garton et al. 1999, 80-81).

5.2.3 Reciprocity: Appraisal and Networking

This final section of the analysis investigates the practices that denoted reciprocity in the data. The acts of giving credit, thanking and complimenting turned out to be important when responding to advice, inspiration or esteem support (Baym 2010, 83-84). Reciprocation was

also encouraged by the means of networking initiative, such as linking blog addresses to comments or inviting group members to other social networking sites.

In the data, there were several examples of interactional practices denoting positive politeness, such as expressing gratitude, appreciation and affection (Herring 1994, 279). These practices are designed to address the participants' positive face, i.e. fulfilling the members' desire of being admired and approved of (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61), all the while strengthening the sense of community between the different participants (Herring 1994, 279). For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these various acts of positive politeness as expressions of "appraisal".

Complimenting each other's looks is naturally an important way of showing solidarity and (esteem) support in a style blog community. Reciprocation of these approvals also seems to be expected, especially if the compliment comes from another blogger:

(66) "Sounds like a fun event.
And how amazing does your hair look...LOVE it! You look gorgeous!"

Reply:
"Thanks Lilly - it was so much fun! And I REALLY wish I knew how to do my hair like this myself LOL! You're so good at curling your hair - it always looks professionally styled." (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Oct 20)

(67) "Those Old Navy boots look a lot like the Loeffler Randall ones I've been coveting except much much cheaper. You'll have to let us know what the quality is like!
xo, alison*elle"

Reply by author:
"Will definitely let you know what it's like - I'll have to google the Loeffler Randall ones - you always pick the best bags and shoes!" (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Nov 7)

The exchanges in examples (66) and (67) combine the practice of providing esteem support (Baym 2010, 83-84) and that of reciprocation by giving mutual, positive feedback to the other participants. When a blogger receives fashion advice or inspiration from another one, it is also considered polite to give credit, as we can see in examples (68)-(70).

(68) ”RM Mini Mac Bag - I've had my eye on this bag for way too long (especially after reading how much Noelle loves her ;)” (Author on Blog 4, Oct 16)

(69) “I didn't really come up with this outfit myself. After admiring several similar looks from the beautiful Veronika (including this one), I decided to use pieces already hanging in my closet to create a pretty Friday night outfit.” (Author on Blog 1, Oct 29)

(70) “As previously revealed, I know jack all about skincare and really needed some guidance on what products were going to work magic on my very dehydrated sad, old face.

I find the whole realm very confusing and I sometimes feel that brands capitalize on that by bombarding us with “the science” in an attempt to convince us at the checkout that it’s an investment worth making. I needed a professional’s opinion and Caroline (check out her blog here – Link!) gave amazing advice.” (Author on Blog 2, Oct 19)

The statements in these examples got several positive replies, including the ones in examples (71)-(73), which highlights the importance of being inspired and admired by other members of the style blog community.

(71) “I love the sweater!! Getting fashion from other bloggers is the best. It has really helped me pare down my closet and put together great outfits that I feel good in. And you look very cute!” (Comment on Blog 1, Oct 29)

(72) “Caroline is amazing! I love her advice. I've been trying the Emma Hardie cleanser (I have the exfoliating beads too but yet to try them)- I love the cloth that came with it and have been converted to using flannels over muslin cloths. It feels like a facial every day! x” (Comment on Blog 2, Oct 19)

(73) “Love this outfit and am a huge fan of Veronika's style too!! I especially love your bag!
Megan
budgetfashion101.blogspot.ca” (Comment on Blog 1, Oct 29)

When receiving appreciative comments from the readers it was also a common practice for the author to express her gratitude in an affectionate way, like the author of Blog 1 does in example (74):

(74) “Thanks for all of the sweet comments girls! I always appreciate it, and reading them always puts a huge smile on my face :)” (Author on Blog 1, Oct 29)

As we learned in the previous section, asking for and giving advice were extremely common interactions in the data. As well as thanking in advance, it was also commonplace

for a reader to show her appreciation for the author's previous advice in a separate comment, like in example (75):

(75) "Just wanted to pop on here and tell you I've really enjoyed reading back through your blog! I love your gingham shirts under sweaters! Also wanted to thankyou for posting the link for the watch at Nordstroms, I ordered a gold one yesterday, looking forward to playing with bracelts with the watch.
Many thanks!"

Reply:
Lilly11/07/2012
"Aw thank you :) Let me know how you like the watch, I really like the style of it." (Comment and reply on Blog 4, Nov 7)

Expressing gratitude was clearly the most common form of appraisal present in the style blogs. In fact, an abundance of examples of showing appreciation for advice was found in the data, with topics ranging from style and shopping tips (example (79)) to TV recommendations (77) health pointers (76):

(76) "As a brand new mom, I need a good diet like yours. Thanks for sharing." (Comment written on Nov 1 to an entry posted in Blog 1 on Oct 31)

(77) "Beautiful dress! Have the etsy version of the necklace- Big fan of the Newsroom. Going to check out Homeland though-your recommendations never disappoint! :)"(Comment on Blog 2, Oct 21)

(78) "I really need to reorganize my skincare and I love how you've done yours! Thanks for the inspiration. xx
www.bohoglow.wordpress.com
www.youtube.com/user/bohoglow"

Reply by author:
"Thanks Rachel! I am trying to be neat but give me a couple of weeks and it will all be ruined :) haha" (Comment and reply on Blog 2, Oct 19)

(79) "Thanks for sharing the details of how we all can get in on the Express pop-up's in T.O!
XX"

Reply by author:
"You're welcome - hope you get the chance to visit one!" (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Nov 14)

In expressions of appraisal, the use of emoticons and other extra-linguistic cues, such as x's to mark kisses (example (78)), was frequent. Although emoticons were often used to distinguish

humor (cf. section 5.2.1), in cases like example (77), they were also used literally as markers of emotion, denoting friendliness and affection. The use of affectionate nicknames was also a common practice; the group members familiarized the other participant by referring to her affectionately as, for example, "babes" (80) or "doll" (81):

(80) "ohhh love your haul babes!! i want that box of all super stars kit hahaha :p!! i'll have to look for it when i'm visiting the states during the holidays :)!" (Comment posted on Blog 1 on Nov 12, to an entry posted on Nov 9)

(81) "You look so cute, doll! I love that bag.
xo Josie
www.winksmilestyle.com" (Comment on Blog 1, Nov 7)

As in the case of addressing the other participant by name, nicknames can also be used as a way of marking in-group identity through positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987, 107). All these emotional markers had clearly established themselves as part of the community's repertoire; it appeared that these small ways of showing appraisal had gained symbolic value within the group (Gumperz 1982, 202).

Another common feature of appraisal related insider lingo (Baym 2010, 77) that could be seen as a marker of in-group status, as well as an incentive to reciprocate, was apparent in the practice of adding an affectionate goodbye note to the end of a comment, marking the relationship between group members as close. This note could be a simple "xo", as in example (81), or a longer greeting, like the one in example (82):

(82) "love your outfit!! so chic
kisses from Milano
http://sienastyle.blogspot.it/" (Comment on Blog 4, Nov 1)

On the basis of the data, it certainly seems that thanking, complimenting, apologizing and other communicative acts associated with civility and positive politeness are an important part of the culture of style blogs. This phenomenon might be related to the fact that although

there are several popular, actively updated style blogs authored by men[2], writing about style online remains a predominantly female genre. According to Brown and Levinson (1987, 251), research has shown that in some communities, men tend to use on record strategies more, while women's speech exhibits more positive politeness features, as well as qualities such as the use of endearments and rhetorical questions. The effect of gender in online communication patterns has also been noted by previous research; in her study of politeness in CMC, Herring (1994, 280) found out that men were more likely to be adversarial, sarcastic and even hostile in their online interactions, whereas women tended to post more messages of agreement, appreciation and support. Women also apologized and used hedging more than men did (ibid.). In addition to this, they were more likely to be bothered by violations of positive politeness (for example flaming, sarcasm and profanity) than men, who were most bothered by online behavior that caused impositions on their time and attention, such as the repetition of frequently asked questions (Herring 1994, 287). Of course, since the present study does not provide a comparison between style blogs written by male and female authors, it is difficult to say how much of the civility phenomena can be attributed to the participants' gender. Nonetheless, expressions of appraisal were clearly part of the shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83) of the blogs in the data sample.

While the expressions of admiration and thanking show that reciprocating to compliments can be viewed as an important emotional community-building tool on style blogs, reciprocation is also significant from the point of view of networking and acquiring more readers and/or community members. According the Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997), there seems to be a link between reciprocity (or, in their terms, interactivity) and the continued survival of an online community; groups that contain a lot of interactive communication

[2] See for example: The Face Hunter http://facehunter.blogspot.com/ [Accessed 28 February 2013]. On February 28, 2013, the blog had 124407 followers on Instagram and 71060 on Twitter.

between the participants are both likely to attract new members, and to ensure that the existing members remain a part of the community. Readers seem to respond more eagerly to blog entries that contain information they can relate to.

As mentioned earlier, in her analysis on conversation among friends, Tannen (1984, 79-81) noticed that when one member of the group of friends disclosed personal information, others reciprocated by sharing their own experiences to build rapport. This kind of behavior was also visible in the style blogs I studied; the readers often "latched on to" a personal detail told by the author, and responded to it by telling their own stories – especially if they shared the same experience.

(83) "I'm a neutral girl at heart. I don't think I ever wore much color back in high school or college, unless it came in the form of a pretty party dress from Express." (Author on Blog 1, Nov 7)

Reply by reader:
"I use to ONLY wear blacks and grays but now have added color and it makes such a difference!" (Comment on Blog 1, Nov 7)

Reply by 2nd reader:
"Same here - a neutral girl. But I do like splashes of color here and there." (Comment written on Nov 8 to an entry posted on Blog 1 on Nov 7.)

In example (83), the feeling of being of the same group is created by both exchanging personal experiences about wearing color and using style and genre related choices that mark the exchange as typical for style bloggers (the use of the word "neutral" when referring to colors such as black, grey or beige, and presupposed knowledge of the brand Express as a store favored by young, North American girls.)

If sharing experiences is what helps the community stay active, eagerness to network with other bloggers can be seen as equally important for the perspective of community growth. A lot of people "sign" their comments by adding a link to their own blog, as illustrated by examples (84) and (85). This acts as an invitation – I like your blog, maybe you

will like mine, we have something in common – and a sort of calling card, which identifies the reader as another style blogger, as opposed to an "anonymous".

(84) "That necklace is stunning - it's a real standout piece.
Check out my blog folks who adore shopping, coupon codes and generally pretty things!
Aussie gals particularly welcome ;) hehe, Aus blogger chicks represent!
~ Shop It Snazzy" (Comment on Blog 2, Oct 21)

(85) "Oh my, you are adorable!! I LOVE this sweater with that cute shirt underneath! :) I am your newest follower!! Yay!! Follow me at: bridgettenicole.blogspot.com
-Bridgette" (Comment on Blog 4, Nov 1)

Although adding the address of the reader's own blog or website to the end of the comment can seem like a mere formality, sometimes the author does accept the invitation, thus strengthening the feeling of mutual interest by reciprocation, as is showed in examples (86) and (87).

(86) "Loving your blog! I love your style and all your photos!
xo Emily
www.bupster.blogspot.com"

Reply:
"Thanks Emily! I enjoyed checking out your blog too - love the layered look you did with the blue gingham shirt & grey sweater...super cute!" (Comment and reply on Blog 3, Nov 14)

(87) "You looked lovely! That dress is really different, but in a beautiful and wearable way. Looks like that event was pretty fun too! xx
www.bohoglow.wordpress.com
www.youtube.com/user/bohoglow"

Reply:
"Thanks Rachel - just subscribed to your YT channel :)" (Comment and reply on Blog 2, Nov 1)

An author can also strengthen community ties by encouraging the readers to approach her through other social networking sites, as the author of Blog 2 does in examples (88)-(89):

(88) "If you have a Pinterest account let me know :)" (Author on Blog 2, Oct 25)

(89) "You have made boyfriend jeans chic instead of frumpy.
You absolute garment angel.
Love your Pinterest boards :)
www.pinterest.com/calamitypin

x o x o”

Reply by author:
“haha thank you! Thats the best compliment ever and now I shall follow you on pinterest!” (Comment and reply on Blog 2, Oct 25)

The importance of replying to comments, commenting on other blogs, networking and forming both emotional and professional connections to other bloggers is illustrated especially well in example (90), where the author of Blog 3 describes her experiences while visiting a blogging conference:

(90) “Along with all the lovely brand reps - I LOVED all the chats I had with fellow bloggers...I struck up so many fun conversations ranging from favorite mascaras to kiddy potty-training tips!” (Author on Blog 3, Oct 20)

The above excerpt shows that although style blog communities operate around a rather narrow topic of conversation, or mutual engagement (Wenger 1998, 73), the interactions that the bloggers have online can lead to the formation of multiplex social networks that are not necessarily restricted to one mode of communication or a particular topic of discussion. This brings them closer to “normal” communities, i.e. social groups that are originally based on face-to-face interactions.

In summary of this section, the most important interactional features that relate to the concept of reciprocity in the data were different forms of appraisal (thanking, complimenting, expressing mutual affection), as well as invitations to network (linking one’s own blog to a comment, inviting blogging acquaintances to other social networking sites). The expressions of appraisal were such a common phenomenon that they appeared as an established part of the participants’ shared repertoire (Wenger 1998, 82-83), while the examples of networking initiative could be seen as ways of keeping the community active and growing, and thus strengthening the feeling of a joint enterprise (Wenger 1998, 77-79) within the group.

6 Conclusion

The results of this study show that although style blogging is a "one to many" form of communication, there are several features in the interactions that take place between the authors and readers that indicate a sense of community. Based on the observations made on the basis of the data collected from four different style blogs, it would appear that a blog can cultivate interactional practices that qualify it as an online community. A majority of the criteria for a virtual community suggested by previous research were realized in the data; the only criterion that was completely absent was sense of space. This is most likely explained by the fact that blog conversations often take place within a network of several blogs, rather than one particular website.

The community-building features of solidarity, support and reciprocity were expressed through several different interactive practices. The participants used humor, especially self-deprecating jokes, to create a sense of solidarity and in-group identity, and trust between participants was built through being honest about product quality, as well as humorous self-disclosure. Informational support (Baym 2010, 83-84) was exchanged in the mutual processes of requesting for advice and asking questions, which were the most common supportive interactions that took place in the comments sections. Other types of support could be seen, for example, in the ways in which participants expressed interest towards each other's lives (social integration or network support) and provided one another with positive, complimentary feedback (esteem support) (ibid.). Reciprocating to compliments, thanking and expressing appreciation were also very common practices, which might be partly explained by the fact that the participants appeared to be almost exclusively female (Herring 1994, 280). Other occurrences of communicative practices related to reciprocation were seen, for example, in the way the participants linked their blog addresses to their comments and invited people to join them on other social networking sites.

Both the readers and the authors paid attention to each other's needs by the means of face maintenance and politeness strategies, and potential socio-cultural misunderstandings were avoided by, for example, the use of emoticons, capitalization and abbreviations denoting emotion, such as "xo".

Throughout the three themes of solidarity, support and reciprocity, the blog data exhibited features that define what Wenger (1998) describes as a community of practice; a common interest (style), a common goal (acquiring more style-related knowledge, getting feedback on one's own sense of style and helping others develop theirs) and a shared repertoire (examples of fashion-related jargon, established practices of advice seeking and giving, politeness norms and inside humor).

As a style blogger who has spent roughly two years in the blogosphere, first as a silent "lurker" (Wenger et al. 2009, 9) and later as an active participant, I was not surprised by the vast amount of supportive information exchange that took place in the data. However, I had not expected that politeness and face maintenance would turn out to be such essential concepts to my study. As mentioned before, the emphasis on politeness, both in the pragmatics related sense as well as in its common definition, might be at least partly explained by the participants' gender. However, further study is required for investigating whether other factors, such as socio-cultural background, might also have their effect on the use of politeness in blogs. Whatever the reasons behind the participants' choice of using a variety of different politeness strategies, it became apparent quite early in my work that minding each other's positive and negative face, as well as maintaining an overall atmosphere of friendliness, acted as important community-building practices in the blogs.

According to Rheingold (1995, 15), the concept of community is "a matter of emotion as well as a thing of reason and data". It is likely that the people who spend more time and interact more actively on the Internet also feel a stronger sense of online community than

others (Chen, Boase and Wellman 2002, 101). Rheingold (1995, 16) himself admits that he probably cares about online interaction and virtual communities so much because they are a part of his own everyday life. As for example Hartelius (2005, 74) points out, an important part of what defines a community is the members' own perception of being a part of one. Virtual communities do not exist solely in the minds of their members, but the feeling of being a part of a community online is integral in making said community "real" (Fernback 1999, 213). Although some sense of this perception can perhaps be obtained through a text-based analysis of blog entries and comments, the interpretations I have made on the basis of this data do not necessarily reflect the big picture of the participants' feelings on the matter. As Androutsopoulos (2008, 16) states, the best method for analyzing online communication is probably a combination of interviews and observation, since although interviews may "offer insights that are not…accessible through systematic observation", observation may also unearth patterns that are not visible in individual interviews. However, because of the limited scope of a pro gradu thesis project, I decided that conducting interviews in addition to a close analysis of textual data could not be successfully completed in the case of this project. Therefore a larger scale empirical study including interviews and/or questionnaires might be relevant in the future.

It should also be taken into account that my work is a case study of four particular style blogs, and as such, the results will not necessarily apply to all blogs of this particular genre. There are thousands of style blogs in the blogosphere, and not all authors communicate as actively with their readers – furthermore, many popular style blogs, especially those authored by fashion photographers, are picture-heavy in their content, and thus do not contain a lot of verbal communication. However, the results of the present study do support my hypothesis that it is possible for a blog to develop community-like practices, and provide some insight into how this sense of community is created by using language *in this particular context*.

In future research, it would be fascinating to explore the differences between various sub-genres of style blogs in more depth. For example, blogs focusing on plus-size style often contain more discussion on socially sensitive themes, such as battling eating disorders and criticizing beauty ideals set by the media. These types of subjects will most likely stir various opinions among the readers and perhaps result in different kinds of author-reader interactions. It might also be interesting to compare the community building qualities detected in my style blog data with an entirely other blog genre. Personally, I would be interested in studying a male-dominated genre of online groups side by side with the predominantly female world of style blog writing, and investigating the possible effect that gender would have on the interactions and communication practices that take place between the members of a virtual community.

In all future studies of online communication and communities, we should keep in mind that discovering a watertight definition for online community seems unlikely (Baym 1998, 36). Therefore it will be more fruitful to continue to study how different people experience online interaction in particular contexts, and to examine how these experiences are reflected in different logs of CMC discourse.

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