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The Roles of Bloggers in Web 2.0

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Abstract

Title:	The Roles of Bloggers in Web 2.0
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Authors:	Alena Bazlova and Alix Behmer
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Keywords:	Blogging, Roles, Web 2.0, Social media, Marketing Communication, Opinion Leadership
Thesis purpose:	The purpose of this research was to examine the roles of bloggers in Web 2.0. Blogging is considered to be a fairly new phenomenon and blog authors are increasingly seen as producers of user-generated content wielding influence on both their readers and respective industries. Thus, it is argued that recognizing the different roles assumed by bloggers will shed light on the importance of bloggers and how this may affect marketing practices.
Methodology:	Following an interpretive epistemology and social-constructionist ontology, a qualitative and abductive research design was chosen for this study. Thus, data was collected through conducting netnography and semi-structured interviews with bloggers.
Theoretical perspective:	The thesis builds upon existing concepts from the field of communication theory and sociological role theory, which helped in building an understanding of the bloggers' roles and their evolution within social settings.
Empirical data:	The data was gathered over a period of six weeks through non-participant online observation (netnography) of 14 fitness and healthy lifestyle blogs and additional semi-structured Interviews with five female bloggers.
Conclusion:	Throughout the research, a specific focus was given to the discovery of the over-arching communicative role of bloggers, thus resulting in the discovery of six different roles emerging out of the bloggers' social interaction. The roles include opinion leader, information provider, product introducer, brand advocate, networker and inspirer and will guide marketers in their efforts to integrate bloggers into their marketing practices.

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Alena Bazlova

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1. Introduction

The introductory chapter presents an in-depth background of the blogging phenomenon. First, the rise and characteristics of blogs within the framework of Web 2.0 and their potential value for marketers are outlined, together with their impacts on the marketing practice. In the literature review, the existing scholarly literature on the concepts of blog marketing and some of the roles that the bloggers assume are discussed. Based on that review, gaps in the existing literature are discussed and the research problem is stated. Finally, this chapter presents the research purpose of the study.

1.1 Background

Over the past years, the world has seen a significant development and growth in the online environment. At present, there are more than 2.5 billion Internet users worldwide and this number is constantly growing (Internet World Stats, 2013). The Internet now plays an ever-increasing role in the lives of millions of people. The rapid development of information technologies and Internet has caused major changes in communication behaviors: the time that people used to dedicate to traditional media is now increasingly being spent on online media. Further, it has altered traditional media, which implies one-way communication from sender to receiver. For marketing practice, this indicates that companies pass on their intended message directly to consumers, as seen in traditional advertising on television or radio (Winer, 2009). This is in line with traditional communication theory from the twentieth century, for example, transmission models of communication such as the “*Shannon-Weaver Model*” (1949). The model separates the roles of ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’, whereas the sender is seen as the active decision-maker who determines the meaning of the message and the receiver is seen as the passive target, absorbing the information (Chandler, 1994).

The new reality of Web 2.0, a term coined by O’Reilly (2005), comprises numerous websites including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google and Wikipedia, being the most dominant platforms, as well as other communicative genres such as blogs, social networks, and chats. All of these web genres emphasize social aspects as they permit the user to co-create, interact and produce content with fellow users. Hence, Web 2.0 is considered a diverse space where individuals play a key role as content providers, as they shape the new communicative genres that are rapidly emerging online (O’Reilly, 2005; Lomborg, 2012).

The advent of Web 2.0 has altered the nature of the one-way communication models, with the concept of information flow becoming increasingly important (Winer, 2009; Park, Ahn &

Kim, 2010). Central themes in today's media landscape include interactivity, co-creation, and an overall shift toward consumer empowerment (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The new online tools invite user-generated content, produced or co-created by individual Internet users rather than by paid professionals, and allow for a highly interactive two-way communication between all actors involved (Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Chiang & Hsieh, 2011). In the marketing context, the empowered consumer has become more confident and trusting of their own opinions and those of peers rather than accepting messages from companies without questioning them (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). This shift may be explained by consumers' easy access to a variety of information channels and the ability to interact with other consumers, businesses, and brands (O'Brien, 2011). Lastly, in the past years, various scandals have undermined people's confidence in the credibility of businesses, which has caused them to rely on other sources of information (Sustainable Brands, 2013).

1.1.1 The Blogging Phenomenon

One important type of user-generated content is the blog. As part of the new Internet environment, this medium also has seen a significant growth among Internet users over the past years. In fact, O'Reilly (2005) argues that the rise of blogging is "one of the most highly touted features of the Web 2.0 era". The term "weblog" was first coined by American Internet writer Jorn Barger in 1997; the shorter "blog" appeared a few years later (Edelmann & Intelliseek, 2005). In 2004, it became apparent that blogging was not only a temporary phenomenon, but meant to last, when the Merriam-Webster online dictionary declared 'blog' the #1 word of the year, defining it as a "website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer" (Ojala, 2005, p. 270). Another definition of the term "blog" that is often quoted in academia includes "frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological order" (Herring *et al.*, 2004, p. 1). Ever since, blogs have gone from being "under the radar" to becoming a mainstream online medium (Edelmann & Intelliseek, 2005). According to Technocrati, a search engine company for blogs, on average, every second a new blog is created (Rickmann & Cosenza, 2007). By the end of 2011, 181 million blogs were tracked worldwide (The Nielsen Company, 2011).

Among scholars (Baumer, Sueyoshi & Tomlinson, 2008; Bouhleb *et al.*, 2010; Park *et al.*, 2010), there is consensus that within the last decade, blogs have become an important, and influential part of the media landscape, popular culture, and the daily lives of countless

Internet users. In a world of 70 million blogs (Athique, 2013) and the number rising, blogs continue to outpace other traditional media in terms of trust and generating consumer recommendations. Through their more personalized, distinct character, blogs have become more appealing to consumers than the companies' own websites when looking for information on products (Kent, 2008; Bouhleb *et al.*, 2010).

The range of topics covered in blogs includes personal experiences, reviews and opinions on products or services, technology, beauty and fashion, entertainment, politics, and others. This study, however, will focus on bloggers writing about fitness and healthy lifestyle. Since most bloggers in this genre take firm stands on various issues and encourage readers to do likewise through comments, blogs have become online communities where users share their thoughts and experiences (Kaye & Johnson, 2011; Kaye, 2005). Through these interactions, relationships between bloggers and their readers are established which is reflected in the complex social network of blogging communities, called the *blogosphere* (Chau & Xu, 2012).

1.1.2 Blog Characteristics

Blogs contain characteristics that distinguish them not only from traditional communication channels, but also from their online media counterparts. Opposed to traditional media with its one-way flow of information, blogs have established "a new paradigm of interactivity" (Chiang & Hsieh, 2011). According to Lenhart and Fox (2006), 90 percent of blogs are highly interactive as they employ threaded dialogue, thus providing a platform of interaction between individuals, groups, and organizations. This dialogue takes place in new formats, such as the comment section. Further, Kent (2008) states that many readers find threaded dialogue even more compelling than the blog postings themselves.

Another characteristic of the medium is the "speed with which blogs allow information to be disseminated" at any time during the day (Maratea, 2008, p. 144). Edelman & Intelliseek (2005) perceive that it is because of that speed, bloggers are able to "alter the volume and tone of any conversation" (p.2). This showcases how bloggers are enabled to produce content in a short time span and react instantly to online interactions. Moreover, blogs also fulfill emotional needs beyond information and convenience, such as entertainment, relaxation, and, involvement (Kaye, 2005). Additionally, they satisfy individuals' needs for social interactions and self-expression (Baumer *et al.*, 2008).

1.1.3 Blog Uses within Marketing

Due to their flexible and interconnected nature, blogs can be used for various purposes. They are well-suited for “taking the temperature” which means that information and consumer feedback can be collected and analyzed by companies (Chua *et al.*, 2009; Kent, 2008). Conversations taking place on various blogs often become an influential source for particular industries and the messages exchanged between bloggers and their readers are highly amplified throughout the Internet (Berman, 2008). Further, blogs can be used as a tool to manage reputation and build trust by responding effectively and quickly to consumers’ comments posted in blogs (Singh *et al.*, 2008). Some stress the use of the new medium as a tool for issue framing and persuasion, when influencing individuals and the public (Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005).

Eventually, the new medium has entered the realm of marketing promotion: the new term blog advertising describes the “process of paying bloggers fees to mention, review, promote, or sell products” (Fu & Chen, 2012). Compared to traditional advertising, blogs can create strong impacts at relatively low costs, but at the same time, guarantee high reader coverage. Additionally, the use of blogs as a marketing tool facilitates an effective engagement of target groups since blogs tend to attract people with similar interests and desires. Companies can use blogs as an extension of relationship marketing as they communicate interactively with customers, shape their attitudes, and create high levels of loyalty (Fu & Chen, 2012). Presently, companies can approach services such as *Blogads* and request to be matched with a blogger that is willing to place an advertisement or sponsored content promoting the companies’ brands or products on their blog. However, there is an ongoing debate about the benefit of blog advertisement, since its presence may undermine the truthfulness of the blogger and his or her intentions (Shimp, 2010). Hence, it is crucial to study and understand blogs since many businesses turn away from traditional media to social media, which, in turn, has become their largest web presence overtaking companies’ websites and e-mail programs. In fact, social media, together with blogs, have altered how businesses interact and communicate with their consumers (O’Brien, 2011).

Further, this new online realm brings along and naturally creates new roles for the individual standing behind the blog. Theories relating to the concept of roles have been widely discussed in sociology and can be described as the identity a person assumes over the course of social interaction (Ravasi & Van Rekom, 2003). Through blogging, the writer takes on a

role and projects an image that he or she would like the audience to believe in. Scholars have already suggested potential roles of the bloggers, such as the one of the opinion leader, which will be elaborated on in the literature review section.

To conclude, Web 2.0 has brought along many new practices to the field of marketing as well as questions that still need to be answered. One of them is whether marketers could resort to the new roles that bloggers acquire through the creation of this content for their own marketing purposes (Berkman, 2008).

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Previous Research on Blogging and Bloggers

Despite its relatively recent emergence, blogging is already a thoroughly investigated field within academic research. Marketing and communication literature has analyzed the phenomenon from various angles and, thus, provides a broad variety of sources to review. A significant amount of research has highlighted the communicative, interactive nature of blogging, for example, through analyzing conversations between blogs (Efimova & de Moor, 2005), exploring the information flow within the blogosphere (Park *et al.*, 2010) or analyzing blogs from a network perspective which looks at social structures displayed in social networks (Herring *et al.*, 2004; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Research has been conducted on the relationship between bloggers and readers as content producers, and how both parties through the process of interaction negotiate blog content. Yet, it has not been investigated how this negotiated content influences the roles that the blogger might assume in the course of blogging. It seems that throughout the last decade, academic research on the blogosphere has, to a great extent, focused on blog readers, their impact and attitudes toward the media they consume and the practices surrounding their use of blogs (Baumer *et al.*, 2008; Chiang & Hsieh, 2011; Chau & Xu, 2012).

With regard to bloggers, various scholars have researched their socio-demographic characteristics, focusing primarily on their motivations and blogging behavior (Herring, *et al.*, 2004; Nardi *et al.*, 2004; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Schmidt, 2007; Park *et al.*, 2010). It is argued that blogs serve their authors in fulfilling elementary human needs such as the need for self-expression, social interaction within a community, and the need for structuring one's past and present experiences (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Nardi *et al.*, 2004). The existing research indicates that the majority of blogs mirror the bloggers' personal experiences and

thus, are of the personal journal type. Researchers such as Trammel & Keshelashvili (2006) explore to some degree in their studies the roles of individual bloggers by discussing the potential role of A-list bloggers as opinion leaders, but all in all, very few have investigated the topic in greater detail. Thus, it becomes necessary to study the roles of bloggers, who, in their function as online communicators, “have the ability to trigger feedback, spark conversations within the community, or even shape the way that other members of a group ‘talk’ about a topic” (Huffaker, 2010, p. 594).

1.2.2 Bloggers as Influencers

When exploring the factors determining the various roles that are assumed through the use of this particular online medium, one factor that can already be stated is the interpersonal influence of bloggers. According to Lenhart & Fox (2006), influential bloggers are considered avid consumers and heavy users of the Internet, as they create online content on a frequent basis. Depending on their position within these dynamic social networks, some bloggers, often referred to as “A-List” bloggers, are more likely than others to influence blogging practice and consumer behavior (Trammel & Keshelashvili, 2006). Their larger audience is likely to guarantee a higher visibility inside the blogosphere as well as outside (Herring, *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, Trammel and Keshelashvili (2006) state that lately some bloggers have started to emerge as “independent experts, with their analyses even appearing in mainstream media” (p. 3). The expansion of their influence to traditional media may be caused by the blogger’ “authority which is based “on the relationship they develop with readers” (Edelman and Intelliseek, 2005), p. 10). Doyle *et al.* (2012) note that a blogger who possesses knowledge and integrity is expected to be perceived as trustworthy source of information and thus will provide the basis for the readers’ decisions and actions.

1.2.3 Bloggers as Opinion Leaders

The conception of bloggers as individuals exerting influence leads to the existing research, which predominantly considers the importance of the blogger as being online opinion leader. Grewal, Merhab and Kardes (2000) define the concept of opinion leadership as the reflection of an “individual’s ability to influence other individuals attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way in a particular domain” (p. 236). Based on their expertise and knowledge on a particular topic, they are perceived as more informed and thus, trusted by other individuals (Corey, 1971; Van der Merwe & Van Heerden, 2009). Elaborating on their role, Burt (1999) considers opinion leaders as brokers who deliver information between social

groups (p.1). Further, Burt notes that they are “brokers in the sense that their influence is between, rather than within, groups” (p. 46). The central notion contained within these definitions is the use of interactive communication as a means of influence. In their two-step flow of communication model, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) argue that information flows from mass media to mass audiences through the mediation of opinion leaders.

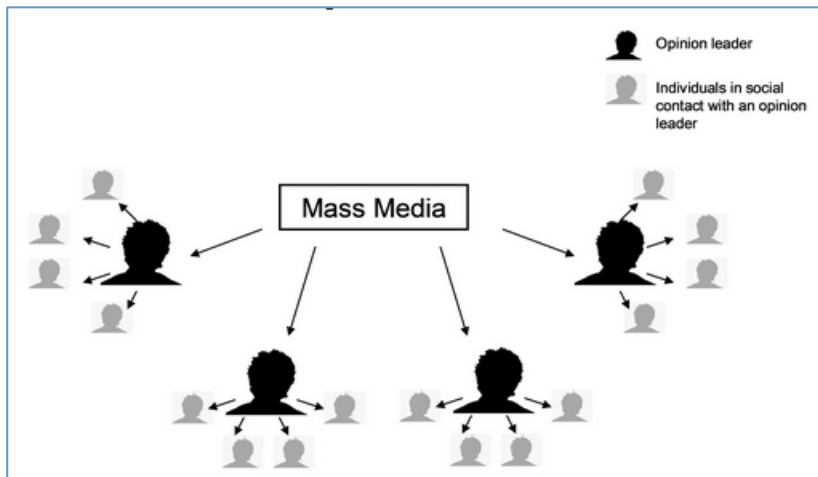


Figure 1: Two-step flow of mass communication model, adapted from Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955)

In the online context, opinion leaders are known for generating buzz about brands and companies (Kirby & Marsden, 2006). Their circle of influence expands as their peers spread the message. Moreover, various scholars (Corey, 1971; Grewal *et al.*, 2000; Kirby & Marsden, 2006; Van der Merwe & Van Heerden, 2009) have argued that opinion leadership is part of word-of-mouth communication. Applied to the field of blogging, Segev, Villar and Fiske (2012) suggest that the increasing marketing tendency towards establishing relationships with bloggers originates from the conjecture that bloggers are opinion leaders who use their blogs as a platform to diffuse information to consumers.

At its core, social media is about building relationships, and as blogging is considered as a legitimate form of that new type of media, it can be argued that bloggers may be involved in creating and sustaining a long-term relationship between brands and consumers. Increasingly, brands are acknowledging the consumers’ perception of bloggers as “trusted peers”– people tend to be more trusting of other consumers or members of the public than it is of traditional institutions such as corporations, advertisements, marketers, and other officials (Edelman & Intelliseek, 2005). Thus, in order to explore other potential roles of bloggers besides being online influencers and opinion leaders, not only bloggers and the

blog content they create must be examined, but also the conversation they have with their external audience.

1.3 Research problem

Along with the rise of the blog as a medium, bloggers have continuously established themselves in a dominant position within the online realm, thereby indicating a power shift from traditional media to new media and their actors. In order to understand what makes so many people follow and engage with bloggers, one must examine the roles bloggers acquire over the course of their Web 2.0 activities. Hence, considering the soaring presence of blogs and their authors in both online and offline context, the researchers see a need to investigate this topic in-depth in order to provide a valuable contribution within the field of research on blogging.

Additionally, as companies increasingly are using blogs as platforms for marketing purposes, they must adapt their strategies to reach out to these new channels. It becomes important for companies to find, select and approach bloggers that not only fit the brand, but also remain authentic and credible as they tell the brand's story from their own angle (Greenberg, Yaari & Bar-Ilan, 2013; Kayes *et al.*, 2012). Hence, it is essential for companies considering using bloggers as marketing vehicles to know what role these bloggers assume in order to approach those that present the best fit with their marketing strategy.

It is argued that consumers in the Web 2.0 era increasingly want "dialogue, not a monologue" (Armellini & Villanueva, 2011). Rather than just being informed, people want a story about a brand from an external source that they can relate to and which speaks to their emotions. Therefore, companies are reaching out to influential bloggers for collaborations (Kayes *et al.*, 2012). Thus, blog authors can become a third party, acting as sender of the story, instead of the brand or company. This horizontal, peer-to-peer communication is likely to increase the credibility and the chances that the stories will be placed outside of the brand's context, thereby reinforcing and extending its reach.

To our knowledge, no clear attempt has yet been undertaken to reflect upon the full range of roles that bloggers can assume during their blogging activity. Rather, only little is known about the different roles bloggers acquire through their blogs, whether those may range from brand advocate to independent content producers. Therefore, the research aims at

investigating and defining the various roles of bloggers and how these roles are created through interplay between bloggers and consumers.

1.4 Gap and Research Question

By examining previous research on bloggers, it becomes clear that the emphasis has mainly been placed on how the blogger's self is shaped through the continuous interaction between the bloggers and their readers (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Lomborg, 2012). Further, it is argued that "the blogging self is a collaborative accomplishment" and that the content produced on the blog is co-created. Yet, the roles deriving from this interaction are never discussed. The researcher then arrives at the conclusion that bloggers and readers are "tight-knit groups of stronger affiliation [that] emerge over time as participants continuously read and comment on each other's blogs, defining norms and boundaries of interaction, and areas of common interest around which their conversations can evolve" (p. 432). Due to the rapid development of blogs as social networking tools, the number of people who are engaged in the blogosphere, either through expressing themselves online or just consuming online content, has greatly increased.

Thus, there is an apparent gap in the study of social actors involved in the blogging phenomenon regarding the particular roles that bloggers assume through the interaction with readers. Hence, closing the gap in understanding the significance of bloggers for marketing practices requires a closer examination of these online actors. Based on the previously reviewed literature on the blogging phenomenon, we pose the following research question: *What are the roles of bloggers in Web 2.0?* This question might be extended in a subsequent manner by asking to what extent these roles actually overlap or differ from each other.

1.5 Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the roles of the bloggers in Web 2.0. The exploratory nature of this study aims at investigating bloggers in the field of fitness and healthy lifestyle and their importance as a tool for marketing. Blogging is fairly new phenomenon and blog authors are increasingly seen as producers of user-generated content wielding wide influence on the both industry and readers. Thus, it is argued that recognizing the different roles assumed by bloggers will shed light on the importance of bloggers and how this may affect communicative practices within the field of marketing.

Further, by exploring the bloggers' roles from various perspectives, we aim to expand the conceptualization of using blogs as a tool for marketing communications. Moreover, the relevance of traditional communication theories, such as Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow of communication model, will be explored against the new reality of Web 2.0 depicted in blogs. Besides the theoretical contribution, this study will have a practical relevance for companies: Having a better understanding of the roles in that particular industry is likely to provide marketers with a tool for disseminating marketing messages and will guide them how to integrate and build relationships with the new online influencers.

2. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach and the methods that were used to collect data for this study. Moreover, the research design including the choice of sampling and the selection criteria is illustrated. Further, it is explained how the data was collected and analyzed. Finally, methodological limitations related to netnography and interviews are expressed.

The following chapter describes how netnographic observation and interviews were used to gather data in the area of exercise and fitness blogs, with the goal of revealing the different roles bloggers might assume in the course of their blogging activity. Qualitative research was considered an appropriate approach while studying a new area of research as it allows researchers to learn about the behavior by observing the online blogging community. Since the activity of blogging entails generating a rich and large amount of data and the researchers wanted to connect closer to the population of study, it was argued that the qualitative method fits these criteria.

In order to establish a broader context for the research, a brief overview of the field of exercise blogs is provided: generally, fitness plays a significant role in Western society, as people are becoming increasingly conscious of being in good health and physically fit. With the rapid growth in the popularity of blogs, fitness blogs have emerged as a new genre. In fact, Lenhart and Fox (2006) indicate in their *Pew Internet Project blogger survey* that entertainment-related blogs on topics such as sports, specific hobbies and health are among the most popular ones in the blogosphere. Specifically for our study, the blogosphere surrounding fitness and exercise was considered a good area to investigate the role of bloggers because of the high involvement and interaction of the participants. Further, this

type of genre was chosen since it offers a rich ground for research as it displays consumption habits and brand narratives, as expressed by Kozinets (2006).

2.1 Research Philosophy

In general, research design serves as a “roadmap” guiding the data collection as it describes where and how to collect the data needed. Prior to that, one needs to establish one’s philosophical stand as this helps to clarify the choice of research design and its suitability for the research purpose (Creswell, 2013). The production of data is based upon epistemology and politics and is therefore influenced by a “general set of assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2008, p. 31). Thus, the choice of methodology and research design is a philosophical decision concerning what the researcher considers as important. Hence, a deep understanding of the philosophical assumptions is an essential part of the research process, as they provide insight into the researcher’s epistemological and ontological views and standpoints.

2.1.1 Ontology

Generally, the term ontology refers to the nature of reality and deals with the assumptions researchers have about the way the world works and the attitude they hold towards the perception of reality (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This particular study leans toward a social constructionist ontological stance which, according to Brymann and Bell (2011), considers social phenomena and their meanings as outcomes of the interactions between individuals. Thus, it regards reality as being socially constructed by the perceptions and actions of social actors within them (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The bloggers were thus regarded as social actors from a social constructionism perspective, as they provide many diverging interpretations of the situations in which they find themselves. However, one needs to take into account that since researchers are social actors themselves, they are highly influenced by their own experiences and interpretations of reality which, in turn, will have an impact on the research process (Saunders *et al.*, 2009; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). In this research, the chosen ontological assumption implies recognizing the idea of multiple realities rather than "one" reality. According to Creswell (2013), this means that the researcher may express different perspectives as themes develop in the findings.

2.1.2 Epistemology

A social constructionist ontological stand is often closely linked to an interpretivist epistemology (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). According to Bryman and Bell (2011) the term epistemology itself relates to issues of how general knowledge is determined within a field of study and what knowledge is considered acceptable. Accordingly, an interpretivist position pursues an understanding of the social world through an examination of how it is being interpreted by its participants and acknowledging their diverse views of reality (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Thus, taking an interpretivist epistemological stance implicates that interpretations of phenomena are subjective (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Consequently, the reality described by the bloggers as social actors must be seen as socially constructed through their interaction. Creswell (2013) has argued that in order to gain access to subjective evidence from those social actors, the researchers should attempt to reduce the distance to them. Since, in this study, reality is seen as subjective, the social world must be interpreted from the perspective of the bloggers, meaning that we need to see the world through their eyes in order to examine in-depth the field of study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, the blogger's perceptions and experiences depicted in the blog will serve as a departure point of this study. Due to the different views contained in the data gathered over the course of the netnographic research and interviews, interpretation is needed to make sense of this data. However, we acknowledge that choosing a different epistemological approach may have led to a different interpretation of results.

The objective of this study is to research and understand the different roles assumed by bloggers in the field of exercise and health. Moreover, the study's findings will be reflected in the typology, which is to be developed partly prior to the data analysis. The former will be based both on a deductive and inductive approach during the process of data analysis, thereby outlining how these particular roles are established in the realm of the blogosphere. This will be further discussed in section 2.2 when discussing the abductive approach of our research. Since the understanding and the explanation of social phenomena are fundamental elements in interpretivism (Saunders *et al.*, 2009), choosing this approach seems suitable for this study as it refers to characteristics of the blogging phenomenon, such as interactivity and two-way flow of communication. By establishing the above mentioned ontological and epistemological philosophical standpoints, they will guide the researchers in

obtaining a better understanding of the roles of the actors involved in the social interaction displayed in blogs.

2.2 Research Design

2.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

In alignment with the social constructionist ontological stance of our research, a qualitative approach is considered to be most suitable to explore the different roles of bloggers (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). Silverman (2011) notes that qualitative research is mostly concerned with the generation of theory and not with testing it, making it an appropriate design for answering the research question. Rather than striving for the quantification of the collected data, it stresses the importance of words (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this study, these "words" can be retrieved from observations and interviews, and were subsequently interpreted by the researcher.

A common feature of qualitative research design is the formulation of broad research questions that ask for "an explanation of the central phenomenon or concept in a study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 129). In addition, conducting qualitative research allows for a more holistic overview of the specific phenomenon in question, as it facilitates various interpretations of these data. Thus, by exploring a complex set of factors surrounding a central phenomenon such as blogging, and then presenting varied perspectives held by the individuals involved in this phenomenon, a wider picture can be painted which is likely to contribute to the advancement of the research field. In our study, we seek to disclose the particular concept of bloggers' roles as they express themselves and communicate with their audience through their online-based writing. Due to the nature of this qualitative study, the findings cannot be viewed as generalizable because, unlike in quantitative research, it is hard to achieve a standardization of the data gathered (Malhotra, 2010). Moreover, Brymann & Bell (2011) argue that qualitative research is a highly reflexive process, which enables the researcher to make adaptations and changes during the research process regarding the theoretical framework or method chosen. This flexibility allows the researchers to incorporate new findings and insights as they come into sight throughout the research process.

2.2.2 Evaluating the Quality of Qualitative Research

In the tradition of quantitative research, the criteria of reliability and validity serve as an important means to assess the quality of the research itself. (Bryman & Bell, 2011) Whereas the term reliability has been referred to as the level of consistency within the data, and thus, to what extent the results are actually duplicable, the criterion of validity indicates whether a study measures what it is supposed to measure (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Silverman, 2011). Yet, the relevance of these criteria in qualitative research has been widely debated among scholars. For instance, meeting the reliability criterion can be difficult in qualitative research, given the fact that the empirical data are provided by people and social settings and circumstances things might change following observation and this in turn might decrease the reliability. For instance, if the blogger ceases to blog or changes the focus of blog content.

Additionally, different research might interpret people and social settings in a different manner than that of other researchers. Also, qualitative results lack the ability to be fully generalizable and representative because the researchers only study a small sample of the population in a particular setting (Maxwell, 2005). This issue proves true for this particular study since the use of purposeful sampling (see section 2.3.2) reduces the sample to a small population of bloggers writing within the field of fitness and healthy lifestyles. However, if it is acknowledged that conditions and circumstances change rapidly, the issue of generalization becomes less important (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

With regards to the representativeness of qualitative research, purposive sampling indicates that the cases examined might not be representative of a population, since this study presents only a snapshot of a situation at a specific point in time (Bryman & Bell, 2011), as it examines bloggers' roles in the context of internet-mediated platforms. Considering that the purpose of this study has been to collect rich data about this phenomenon in order to gain initial insights into this relatively new field, there is less need for a statistical validation of the study's findings to be generalizable for the whole population (Silverman, 2011). Additionally, the population of the research presents a gender bias; out of the fourteen blogs that were examined, all were written by female authors. The researchers acknowledge this fact and realize that it may alter the validity of results, as some roles might remain undiscovered due to the lacking representation of male bloggers in the research.

While some researchers have proposed simply adapting the criteria of reliability and validity to the nature of their research, others have called for employing alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative studies (Bryman and Bell, 2011). For instance, Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest using trustworthiness as an alternative research evaluation criterion. Regarding it as a way for the researcher to persuade his or her audiences that the study's findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), trustworthiness is eventually established through *credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability*. These four elements are thus envisaged as the qualitative researcher's equivalents to conventional terms such as reliability and validity.

According to Guba *et al.* (1994), *credibility* describes the ability of the results and developed theories to accurately reflect the observed results produced throughout the research process. In order to improve the probability that findings and subsequent interpretation are accurate reflections of the online observations, a triangulation of methods was considered useful, as this enables the researcher to compare and reflect upon explanations of the research question in focus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hence, in our research, the netnographic method was complemented by interviews, which helped in affirming the results from the former. As a corresponding concept to external validity, *transferability* relates to the ability of the data collected and the developed theory to be transferred and applied to contexts different from the one of the study (Guba *et al.*, 1994). Thus, in our case, an increased transferability was achieved by providing a thick description and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon investigated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bryman & Bell, 2011). This can be seen in the discussion of the findings derived from data analysis in which bloggers' roles are evaluated against the overall background of Web 2.0 realities.

As defined by Guba *et al.* (1994), *dependability* involves the amount of trustworthiness in relation to how the data were observed and recorded and thus, indicates the perceived reliability of the data gathered. In this study, the *dependability* of the results was enhanced through the systematic recording of all material, including observations, transcriptions, and conversations that played a role during the process of data collection and analysis. The element of *confirmability* implies that the researcher should remain unbiased during the netnographic observation, interviews, and triangulation process (Guba *et al.*, 1994). Potential bias was thus reduced by cross-reading and assessing all recordings and

transcriptions individually prior to a subsequent synthesizing of results (Bryman & Bell, 2011). We argue that by taking all actions necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the trustworthiness criterion, the overall quality of research was enhanced.

2.2.3 Exploratory and Abductive Research Design

This study aims at exploring knowledge, which has not yet been investigated to a large extent. Therefore, our research design is exploratory in nature because it concentrates on the generation of knowledge surrounding the role of bloggers in Internet-mediated communications which, despite the relevance and emerging nature of the blog medium, has not yet been sufficiently explored. Due to the fact that this field has received only little scholarly attention, the objective of this study is to generate new insights and contributions to the existing research, which consequently calls for the adoption of an exploratory stance, hence a qualitative approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

In qualitative research, theory is often generated through the use of an inductive approach (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This derivation of theory ensures good and interesting results because it allows for a kind of analysis in which, according to Kozinets (2010), “individual observations are built up in order to gain a more general understanding of a particular phenomenon” (p.190). Also, our research questions and purpose imply that we follow an inductive research approach in which, in contrast to the deductive theory testing approach, theory is generated from the “bottom up” (Creswell, 2013, p. 45), by allowing theories to be revealed and developed based on a process of observations. At the same time, existing theory is often used to establish a theoretical foundation prior to conducting the research. This notion is supported by Bryman and Bell (2010) who state that an inductive approach is likely to include some deductive elements and vice versa.

This led us to the decision to lean more toward an abductive approach as the underlying logic for our exploratory data analysis, which entails elements of both induction and deduction. Abduction has its point of departure in empirical data, just like induction, but does not reject theoretical preconceptions and is closer to deduction in that aspect, (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In our study this means that established theoretical concepts from the fields of sociology and communication science, and also existing conceptions of bloggers’ roles such as the opinion leader, will help to reveal new insights and create a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of bloggers and serve “as a source of inspiration

for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, the abductive research process in our study moves iteratively between existing theoretical concepts and newly gathered empirical data (p.4), which will enable us to explore the phenomenon in a systematic manner (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). However, it has been argued that, in practice, abduction is difficult to separate from the iterative work-taking place in all empirical research. For this reason, some scholars also refer to the hermeneutic circle when talking about the logic of research and thus, relate abduction closer to interpretivism, our chosen epistemological stance (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Hence, in our work, we employ a theoretical framework derived from both role theory and communications theory, which indicates the overarching communicative role of bloggers, as reflected in the analysis and discussion of our findings (see section 4.2).

2.3 Research method

2.3.1 Data Collection

In order to explore the roles of bloggers, netnography was chosen as the study’s core method for gathering empirical data on fitness blogs. Robert Kozinets, one of the leading researchers using netnography in the fields of marketing and consumer behavior, has defined netnography as “new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). As a research method, it uses already existing data that is publicly available to identify and understand the interactions within relevant online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). Moreover, it allowed us to observe conversations and the development of social structures from these interactions. Compared to traditional ethnography, it is much less time-consuming and unobtrusive, as it guarantees easy access to rich data at low costs. Nevertheless, just like traditional ethnography, netnography is naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) since it manages to capture participants’ behavior in their natural settings and everyday life, and thus provides researchers “with a window into naturally occurring behaviour” (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). In fact, netnographies have proven to be a very useful method for investigating cultural aspects of the online social phenomenon, such as interpersonal communications and social hierarchies (Kozinets, 2010). In conclusion, it is argued that the method’s unique combination of both unobtrusive and naturalistic features creates new opportunities for expanding the relationship between consumers and researchers or marketers (Kozinets,

2002). As an addition to this core method, some of the observed bloggers were interviewed to substantiate and obtain a greater depth of insights (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008).

2.3.2 Netnographic Procedures

Based on the notion that netnographic research requires an immersive combination of participation and observation, Kozinets (2002, 2006, 2010) suggests taking the following four steps: firstly, making a *cultural entrée*; this term refers to identifying fitness blogs as a chosen online forum as they are suitable to deliver answers to the given research questions. Unlike in traditional ethnographies, this identification of leading blogs for this study was done with the help of online search engines and blog directories.

As a second step, Kozinets lists the *gathering and analyzing of data*. In terms of data collection and analysis, it must be noted that through using netnography, most of the observations and interactions are already transcribed automatically in the process. Further, it is argued that the netnographic data collection in this study comprises two major elements: firstly, the data that has been directly copied from the blogs, such as blog posts and their corresponding reader comments; and secondly, the data that stems from the researcher's own observations during the research process which were likewise consulted and used during the writing of this study. The observation of participants was conducted online using an observation checklist (see Appendix A). During the data collection, the researchers acted as non-participant observers and did not interfere in the setting through posting comments on blog posts or identifying themselves. The process of gathering data took place over a period of six weeks, totaling the netnographic observation of 14 blogs, which totaled 140 pages of transcribed data. The netnography was carried out until saturation was reached, with the selected blogs aging from at least one year to five years' existence time.

Thirdly, to ensure accurate interpretations, the researchers took into consideration that it is vital to look both at the content of the blogs and their authors. However, an emphasis should be placed on the blog's content as a main unit of analysis. The final step of following *research ethics and enabling consumer feedback* will not be necessary for our research due to the use of a non-participant approach. In departure from Kozinets's (2006; 2010) suggested principles for conducting netnography, in this study, due to time constraints, a non-participant approach was developed and deployed which allowed us to study the

phenomenon without directly participating in member interactions.. The difference between participant and non-participant netnography lies in the role of the researcher in the data collection process. Whereas the participant netnographer interacts with the group through posts and comments, the non-participant netnographer observes the process so that the group interaction can take place naturally, without interference, which is likely to increase the accountability of the research. Further, the characteristics of netnography suggest that the non-participant method may be sufficient for data collection for the present study, due to the fact that these interactions occur through computer mediation, are publicly available, and are generated in written text form already. For instance, Cova & Pace (2006) employed non-participant methods in their study on the *Nutella* community by collecting data from the website contents including both member postings and photos. Also Belz and Bernbach (2010) resorted to a non-participant approach during their 2010 study on lead user identification in online food forums. Their findings suggest that a non-participant approach can yield similarly valuable and valid research outcomes compared to a participant approach. According to Brymann & Bell (2011), non-participant observation allows researchers to directly experience and categorize these behaviors. Apart from that, this research approach is still congruent with Kozinets' approach (2002) since it looks at the blogs' textual nature, which can be studied as well without participating within the blog's interactions.

2.3.3 Interviews

In addition to the netnographic analysis of blogs, five semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the roles of bloggers as well as their perceptions and viewpoints which will help to gather information which could not be detected through netnography alone (Daniel & Turner, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are suited when working with small samples and are useful for supplementing and substantiating information derived from other sources. Moreover, the method's semi-structured character allowed us to ask questions that were not included in the interview guide (see Appendix B) and to follow up on things said by the interviewees. When drafting the questions for the guide, we tried to ensure that each question was designed in an open-ended manner to obtain as much knowledge as possible. Further, all interviewees were allowed to provide a full response before proceeding to the next question (Daniel & Turner, 2011).

Before contacting the bloggers, the researchers drafted a letter describing the purpose of the research and their backgrounds. Following that, an e-mail was sent to the bloggers resulting in five bloggers agreeing to take part in an interview. The interviews were conducted with the participants individually, either in person, via Skype, or by e-mail. The interviews conducted face-to-face or via Skype took between 15 to 20 minutes. The face-to-face interview with Majja L. took place in Lund, Sweden, and during the Skype interview with Amanda L., the blogger was in her apartment in the U.S.

Table 1: Interviewees' profiles overview

Blog	Name of interviewee	Location of interviewee	Date of interview	Interview medium
Miss Zippy	Amanda L.	USA	April 24, 2013	Skype
Motivationsbloggen	Majja L.	Sweden	April 25, 2013	In person
Fitness Test Drive	Amanda V.	Canada	May 2, 2013	e-mail
Love, Life, Surf	Christine Y.	USA	May 4, 2013	e-mail
Chic Runner	Danica	USA	May 10, 2013	e-mail

In the table found above, an overview of the interviewed bloggers is provided. Prior to conducting each interview, we introduced ourselves to the respondent and then restated our goals and estimated the length of the interview and the topics to be discussed. As recommended by Bryman & Bell (2011), we made sure to use comprehensible language when developing the questions for the interview and while conducting it. In cases where the interview was recorded, the respondents were asked for their written or verbal consent and were reminded that their statements would be kept confidential at all times. Finally, the interviews were transcribed or were already automatically transcribed when sent by e-mail. From all five interviews, the researchers were able to produce 19 pages of transcribed data (see Appendix C).

2.3.4 Sample of Participants

The study at hand used a non-probability sampling method known as purposive sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as only those bloggers were selected who meet criteria for the study, and thus, would be able to contribute to the understanding of the research problem. For this study, the following selection criteria for blogs were established: The blogs had to be written in English, with the bloggers being clearly identifiable, i.e. one blogger visibly responsible for the blog. In addition, they should display a clear focus on exercise and fitness-related issues and demonstrate a reasonable size and audience as derived from both blog rankings and social media presence. On top of that, this type of non-probability sample uses sources of information that are easily accessible and available for the completion of research (Brymann & Bell, 2011). As opposed to sampling considerations in the context of quantitative research, there is less emphasis on issues of representativeness, meaning that the sample does not need to accurately represent the total population (Brymann & Bell, 2011).

Moreover, purposive sampling strategy is expressed through theoretical sampling, which has been advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). It is argued that sampling should be done based on what is significant and relevant to the theory (Brymann & Bell, 2011). Thus, the notion of theoretical sampling implies that “the process of data collection is controlled by the development of emerging theory, as the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes his data and makes decisions concerning what data to collect next and where to find them,” (Brymann & Bell, 2011, p. 443). Hence, for this study individuals were not selected as participants based on their ability to represent the total population but rather, to stand for a portion of the population that share certain specific characteristics or qualities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In that sense, bloggers involved in the field of exercise and fitness were chosen as they stand for a particular community of people with similar interests. Further, this blog genre usually shows a high level of interaction and engagement between bloggers and readers, which is relevant for theory and the examination of the bloggers’ communicative roles.

The first step of the netnographic research involved finding blogs relevant to our research purpose. Since many blogs are listed in blog directories and specialized search engines for blogs, such as Google’s own blog search engine Blogger, Technocrati, or Bloglovin’, an initial

scoping exercise of these directories was undertaken. However, many of these tools restrict the search to the content of blog posts, without the possibility to select bloggers by social variables such as location, gender, or blog size. Additionally, blogs were found through Internet traffic-based rankings and rankings offered by the online portals of influential fitness magazines such as *Shape*, *Fitness Magazine* and *Women's/Men's Health*. Most of these rankings take into consideration aspects such as social sharing, topic-related content, or posting frequency. In order to estimate the influence and popularity of the blogs, the blogger's exposure and participation in other forms of social media was explored, including the number of Facebook fans and Twitter followers.

Once potential blogs were identified, they were further assessed based on the following criteria adapted from Kozinets (2002): Only those blogs should be selected that have a focused, research question-relevant topic; display high "traffic" of postings, detailed or descriptively rich data; and the type of interactions between blogger and readers relevant to the research question. The netnographic analysis was conducted until theoretical saturation was reached which, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), means that the data collection should continue until no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category, and the relationships between categories are well established and validated.

2.3.5 Brief Description of Participants

Netnographies

As the researchers' common language is English, only blogs written in English were taken into consideration for conducting netnography, resulting in the majority of the bloggers coming from the United States. Hence, the use of an online research method provided us with access to populations that otherwise would have been geographically or socially out of our reach (Hookway, 2008). During the research process, it was also revealed that the vast majority of the participants (71%) were fitness professionals, such as certified private fitness coaches and instructors, while the rest of the bloggers (29%) were private hobbyists.

Interviews

Five bloggers from the United States, Canada and Sweden agreed to participate in interviews and talk about their blogging practice and the self-conception of their roles. Further, it became evident that more female than male bloggers were actively involved in the writing of blogs in the area of fitness and healthy lifestyle.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data will be interpreted based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) notion of analysis as the interplay between researchers and data. To handle the vast amounts of qualitative data that netnography can generate, Kozinets (2002) suggests first classifying messages in terms of whether they are primarily social or informational, and primarily on or off topic. Once messages that are directly related to the research questions were identified, a grounded data analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted in the search for themes, as described in the following paragraphs.

The data was categorized by drawing out a limited number of major themes and issues around the research questions, which is helpful in interpreting the data. The themes and coding methods will be described in detail in the following chapter, which deals with data analysis. Brymann & Bell (2011) have described coding as a mechanism not only for thinking about the meaning of the data, but also for reducing the large quantity of data that researchers are faced with. In our study, we managed to reduce the overwhelming amount of information by looking for only those blog posts and comments that were likely to depict the role of the blogger, such as posts inviting the readers' participation and the language used by the bloggers. Nevertheless, the activity of coding may appear difficult, as it requires the researchers to employ an inherent level of deductive reasoning in order to make sense of the observations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Overall, the data analysis was conducted in accordance with Spiggle's (1994) recommended principles for analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. First, all relevant blog content ('about' page, text, product reviews, comments) were extracted and then analyzed with regard to exploring the bloggers' roles based on their self-conception, the degree of interaction with readers and the blog authors' tone of voice which reflects the attitude towards their audience. Subsequently, those quotations were selected from both blogs and interviews that showcased the emerging themes and concepts. Due to the considerably small size of the data set and the lacking access to software for analysis of qualitative data, tools at hand, such as Microsoft's word-processing were used. Using what Kozinets (2010) has dubbed a "semi-automatic" method, data was saved in word processing files, thereby preparing it for coding by organizing it into different folders, such as communicative features, interaction with brands, and bloggers' self-conception of role. Lastly, data from the

blogger interviews were compared with the data from the netnographic research to see if they were in accordance with each other and whether new information emerged from interviews.

As part of coding, a systematic review of the transcriptions enabled us to produce brief summaries that contained the most relevant information. The focus of these summaries was to create short, concise accounts of the bloggers' perceptions, interactions, and characteristics in order to investigate their different roles and also revealing the use of specific vocabulary in relation to these. The completion of these summaries helped to establish different categories reflected in the participants' online interactions which goes in line with Kozinets' claim (2010) that "categories for coding usually emerge inductively through a close reading of the data, rather than being imposed by prescribed categories" (p. 189). Some of these emanating categories included the over-arching communicative behavior displayed in blog post and corresponding comments, such as quest posed by bloggers posed to their audience, how often and in what way they react to their readers' inquiries, and the usage of certain words in relation to brands and products. The findings derived from these categories were subsequently entered into a word document. Further, these initially established categories helped the researchers to become more effective in pursuing information of interest in subsequent netnographic observation and interviews by developing follow-up questions and topics.

2.5 Methodological Limitations

When conducting netnographic research, it is important to be equally aware of the method's opportunities as well as its constraints. In contrast to real ethnographic research, it is hard to capture human behavior displayed in real-time interaction such as in the form of body language or gestures. Moreover, one needs to consider that individuals may present a more favorable and carefully crafted version of themselves online than in real life, which could possibly undermine the trustworthiness of the data collected. In addition, it is difficult to collect or even verify the demographic characteristics of participants in online communities. Dholakia and Zhang (2004) argue that conducting online research evokes uncertainty, since the researchers cannot be sure that people are who they actually claim to be. In order to avoid these pitfalls, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to make the speech act or communicative behavior the unit of analysis, and not the individual. For our research, this notion implies that the research should demonstrate a rather narrow focus on the way the

bloggers communicate with their readers and their tone of voice, for instance, when talking about brands and products, and not the blogger in general.

Moreover, being aware of common analytic pitfalls that are part of the human thinking process becomes essential as the subjectivity displayed in the discussion and conclusion of our analysis is inevitable. A variety of cognitive biases come into the picture already when analyzing the "words" gathered throughout the data collection. One must keep in mind that the interpretation of qualitative data poses a risk for bias in conclusions. Particularly in netnographic research dealing with online observations, being biased presents one of the most common problems. Drawing from social constructionist ontology, it is argued that the individual beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge a researcher holds are most likely to affect his or her perceptions of the observations (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The researchers' interpretative abilities might as well be influenced during the process of observation, which causes them to move from an initially neutral to a rather subjective stance. This might, in turn, affect the study's results, hence depicting an observation biased by the observer's mindset rather than the real occurrence observed. However, since the qualitative research paradigm believes that researcher plays an important role in the process, even if researchers try to distance themselves from the study, it becomes almost impossible. Hence this bias almost becomes the reality of qualitative research, the researchers take the role of a knowledge creator (Mehra, 2002).

Additionally, another common pitfall in qualitative data analysis is the potential threat of losing context during the process of coding, as "chunks" of text are taken out of their initial context. Further, some scholars have argued that the technique of coding may cause a fragmentation of data and thus, lead to a disruption of the narrative flow contained in some of the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, in order to minimize the researcher's bias and enhance the credibility of the qualitative data collected, which is often claimed to be too subjective (Bryman & Bell, 2011), a methodological triangulation of data was considered appropriate. By conducting additional interviews, the findings of the core method, netnography, were further enhanced through interviews, which may add nuances to this study of the blogosphere by revealing aspects that cannot be examined by analyzing the blogs' context alone.

Yet, one needs to take into account the limitations related to the method of using semi-structured interviews. Since the questions were adapted throughout the course of the interview to adapt to the conversation, standardization of answers could not be guaranteed. Another concern with the method is that the order and wording of the questions used by the researchers might have affected the interviewees, thus resulting in biased responses (Malhotra, 2010). Lastly, the fact that some interviews were conducted via e-mail might have impaired the depth of the blogger's answers.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter will provide the reader with relevant theories that will assist in understanding and defining various roles that bloggers might assume in the reality of Web 2.0. The first two subsections will discuss each of the theories and a concluding section will present a proposed theoretical framework linking the two theories together.

Various scholars have emphasized the importance of identifying central bloggers as they play important roles in the online dissemination of information. But little work has been done when it comes to exploring the full extent of those roles. In examining the activities that surround the blog, this study is partially informed by ideas from both role theory and communication theory, which will help to provide a general framework within which to analyze blogs and the roles of their authors.

Firstly, we argue that defining these roles will assist to situate the activities, which individual bloggers are engaged against a larger societal context and thus, will reveal social structures displayed in the blogosphere. Prior to developing a typology of the bloggers' different roles, one must therefore gain a deeper understanding of the concept of roles, which has long served as one of the most popular ideas in social sciences. Secondly, we state that communication theory will help to underline the highly communicative nature of bloggers' roles. Hence, discussing the evolution of traditional communication models in the face of Web 2.0 will help to develop and expand on the already established communicative role of the blogger and other roles that they might develop through constant engagement and interaction with their readers.

The above-mentioned theories will serve as a point of departure to analyze the additional roles the bloggers might assume in Web 2.0. Since the research is based on an abductive approach, role theory and communication theory will be closely examined to determine if

there is a relationship between the two theories and whether that relationship, in turn, influence and create new roles for bloggers.

3.1 Role Theory

3.1.1 Definition of Roles

Since the purpose of this thesis is to examine the roles of the bloggers it is essential to understand the meaning behind the concept of roles. Starting with a broad definition, the term “role” is most typically used to refer to the behavior expected of individuals who belong to a particular social group or category. Those categories may include certain statuses or positions within systems, such as fathers in families, professors in universities, or customers in a market (Lynch, 2007). However, it was not until the early 1930s that the concept of role became a subject of research in the fields of psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior (Welbourne, Johnson & Erez, 1997). Numerous scholars have concluded that roles constitute one of the major building blocks of social structure. Thus, role theory aims at explaining roles by presuming that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations both for their own behaviors and those of others (Biddle, 1986). Also, most importantly for the purpose of our research questions, it investigates how people assume a certain identity in the course of social interaction (Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). In sociology, social interaction is defined as a dynamic sequence of social action that occurs between a number of individuals or groups, for example, talking as form of communication can be considered as a model example of social interaction (Boundless, 2013). When applying social interaction to our study, it is the conversation that occurs through the online medium between all of the participants involved.

Within the field of role theory, two different streams of research have emerged, namely functional and symbolic interactionist role theory, which differ in the sense of how they understand and look at society. First of all, functional role theory focuses on the characteristic behaviors of persons who occupy social positions within a stable social system. It is argued that roles contribute to the accomplishment of specific functions (Biddle, 1986). Further, the functionalist approach, which is largely borrowed from anthropology, sees a role as the set of expectations that society places on the individual. Role expectations are thus comprised of the rights and privileges, the duties and obligations of any occupant of a social position in relation to people occupying other positions in the social structure (Lynch,

2007). From an identity theory perspective, a role is a set of expectations determining behavior that is considered appropriate by others (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995).

In contrast, symbolic interactionist role theory as promoted in the theoretical works of George H. Mead (1934) emphasizes the roles of the individual actors, which evolve through social interaction. The interactionist researcher perceives 'role' not as fixed or prescribed, but rather as something that is constantly negotiated by individuals (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Further, this approach to theory attempts to explain the conception that the individual has of himself in terms of his interaction with others. Mead considered the self to be a product of social interaction with others, through which people come to know who they are through their interactions (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). As the individual's conception of himself emerges from social interaction, it influences, in turn, that person's behavior (Kinch, 1963). Further, the self is considered as differentiated into multiple identities that reside in circumscribed practices, for instance roles or norms. This notion leads to the issue of occupying multiple roles.

3.1.2 Multiple Roles

In his work *The Study of Man* (1936), anthropologist Ralph Linton developed the concepts of status and role in order to denominate behavioral patterns as seen in society. He argued that a role is the set of behaviors associated with a status, and through performing that role by behaving in the expected way, a social status is eventually occupied. Linton went on to state that each person in society inevitably obtains multiple statuses and that each of these statuses has an associated role (Linton qtd. in Merton, 1957). Given the premise that each social status is not reduced to a single role, but an array of roles, one needs to acknowledge that occupying multiple roles is an integral part of our life. Indeed, in everyday life, the average social actor must organize and negotiate among many diverse roles such as employee, parent, partner, friend, colleague, neighbor, and many more. Traditional approaches to understanding role multiplicity find that roles are bound by behavior and separated by means such as location, norms, values or beliefs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Lynch (2007) states that the emergence of new technology and devices has made it easier for people to adapt, overlap, and switch among multiple social roles, often within a short amount of time regardless of social setting. The pervasive use of this technology provides proof that most individuals have little difficulty managing the ever-changing role demands

that have emerged under modern circumstances. Rather, it seems that switching and overlapping of roles have become common facets of everyday social life.

3.1.3 Multiple Roles of Bloggers

Applied to the blogosphere, bloggers as social actors in the online world are seen as assuming at least two roles, communicator and opinion leader, which is sometimes referred to as influencer, since their blogs continue to grow and attract a larger audience (Martin, 2012). Whereas some roles might fall into place quite naturally, other roles must be learned and further reflected upon. However, this research on role theory has not been taken forward to discuss the roles that various individuals can assume throughout the social interaction in online communities such as blogs. As previously stated, online interaction is prevalent in human's lives and by applying the role theory that is based upon the offline community, the researchers will be able to find out the roles that bloggers are assuming online. However, it is not sufficient to examine social interaction from the sociological perspective of role theory to determine the new roles of the bloggers. Communication theory comes into play while individuals are acquiring different roles and in order to back up that notion, a brief overview of communication theory will be given.

3.2 Communication Theory and Web 2.0

The introductory chapter has already discussed and touched upon some of the relevant communication theories, but in this part of the thesis the relationship between communication theory and role theory will be presented. It is important to establish a connection between the two to better understand what new roles the bloggers may possess compared to traditional communicators. Additionally, the communicative role of a blogger is apparent and vital to the existence and popularity of the blog as an emerging medium.

Web 2.0 brought about a significant change in the way people and companies communicate. The old habit of communication distribution is starting to disappear, leaving room for the highly interactive and dynamic information flow through Web 2.0. In this new realm senders become receivers, producers become consumers going against the rules of traditional media and Web 1.0 (Macnamara, 2010). This concept can be described as "two-way decentralized communication" which allows the now active consumers to become not only collaborators but also active content creators (Alcatel-Lucent, 2006). This means that bloggers need to

invite their readers to co-create and collaborate by projecting a certain image or role to their audience.

In his book *Blog Theory*, Jodi Dean (2010) discusses the importance of communication to the blogosphere. Blogs can be seen as both forms of mass communication and interpersonal communication. On the one hand, authors can write about issues that are discussed in mainstream media and add a personal angle to it, and on the other hand, disclose personal stories. Since blogging relies heavily on constant communication to attract readership, bloggers need to ensure to communicate with them on a regular basis. Additionally, communication theory has to be taken into account since interpersonal communication with the audience is one of the keys to the success or failure of a particular blog. If the blogger fails to establish a connection with his or her audience through active communication and engagement, it is very unlikely that the blog will survive (Farrell, 2010). One can assume that it is through active communication and information exchange that bloggers acquire certain roles in the eyes of their audience.

In both traditional media and Web 2.0 the communicator, i.e., the sender, and the audience, i.e., the receiver, have a number of roles. The traditional media landscape is strongly associated with one-step flow communication. Here the media possesses a number of important roles: to inform, to educate, and to influence opinions whereas the audience is the mere receiver of the message (AIBD, 2013). In contrast, the two-step communication flow displayed in new online media is characterized by both the sender and the receiver assuming new roles since the flow of communication is going back and forth between the two active parties (Macnamara, 2010). In particular, the blog facilitates instant communication as the readers can comment in the comment section and connect to other readers, which in itself, will lead to a new communication forum. Bloggers not only communicate internally on their own blog but may also actively participate in external forums by both reading and posting what their fellow bloggers have published (Stephen, 2009). One can presume that some of the Web 2.0 communicators possess the three important roles of information providers, educators and opinion leaders. However, new roles may have been added or previously existing roles may be reshaped to fit the new communication patterns occurring online.

Lazarsfeld's two-step flow of communication model was already briefly discussed in the first chapter and will be used onwards as one of the foundations for developing a theoretical framework regarding the role of bloggers. This model replaced the hypodermic needle model (Baran & Davis, 2012), which assumed that people are only influenced directly by the mass media. Being one of the most influential models in the field of mass communication, at its core the two-step flow of communication model illustrates how information reaches wider audiences through opinion leaders, who are people with the ability to influence others. The necessary qualities of an opinion leader include being sociable, extraverted and one who is affiliated with various groups of people. Additionally opinion leaders are innovative, adventurous, and have a tendency to exhibit public individuality (Segev *et al.*, 2012). According to the two-step flow communication theory, these individuals are better at influencing consumers' decisions than the mass media (Windahl, Signitzer & Olson, 2009). This model is suitable for this research firstly, because, in some cases, bloggers disseminate information to the audience by receiving it from mass media; secondly, they are acting as opinion leaders due to their large audience, belonging to various networks and exhibiting public individuality. Since some bloggers fulfill the criteria of opinion leaders, it can be considered as one of the roles that the bloggers undertake in the new reality of Web 2.0, but, since the purpose of this paper is to investigate additional roles of bloggers, this theory needs to be further developed and adapted.

Since the two-step flow of communication model only implies that bloggers act as opinion leaders, it creates a gap that needs to be examined through combining role theory and communication theory. In blogging, social interaction is constant and ongoing and by investigating the manner in which bloggers and readers communicate the researchers will be able to come up with a typology of new roles that bloggers may assume in Web 2.0.

3.3 Proposed Theoretical Framework

To better understand the connection between role theory and communication theory, a theoretical framework linking the two areas together was developed. Since the two-step flow of communication model hints at the overarching communicative role of the blogger, we believe that it naturally fits in aiding to demonstrate additional roles that might be acquired by the blogger. As role theory discusses how individuals assume certain roles through interaction with others, resorting to communication theory is necessary in order to

define those additional roles that might derive from bloggers’ interactions with other social actors such as readers, other bloggers, and companies. The proposed framework (see figure 2 below) showcases how the two theories influence the creation of new roles in the online setting. Role theory states that individuals may take on multiple roles in a societal setting based on societal expectations of their function or through interaction with others, whereas communication theory indicates that these roles are assumed through two-way communication, which is a significant part of human interaction.

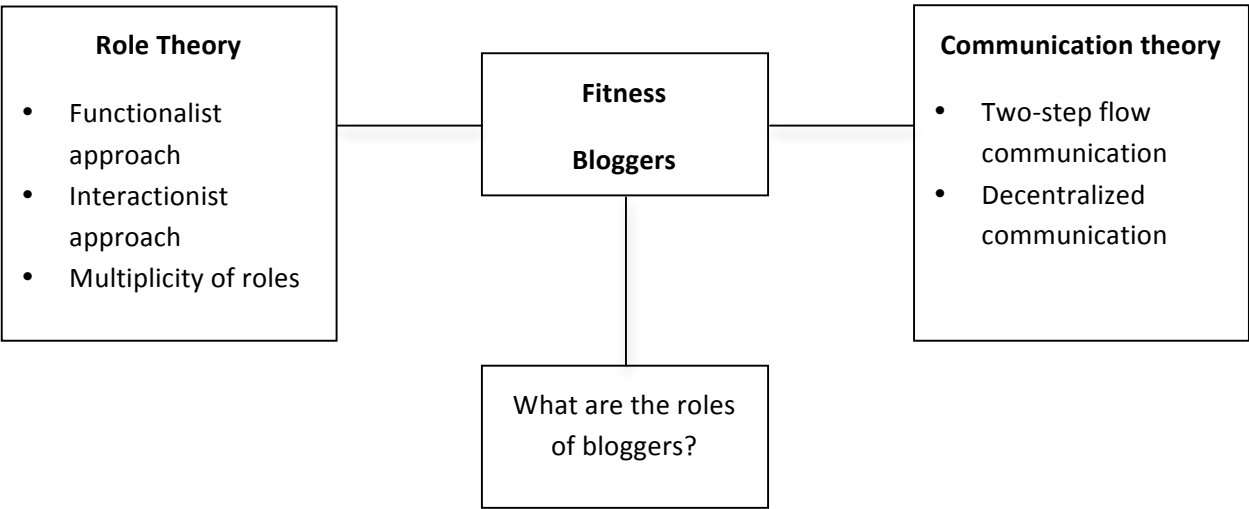


Figure 2: The influence of role theory and communication theory on the new roles of bloggers in Web 2.0

Hence, through the proposed framework we argue that when communication theory and role theory meet, they naturally aid the creation of new roles through communicative interaction in the Web 2.0 setting. By combining these two theories, the researchers are attempting to close the existing gap in the literature since there was no previous work on how the incorporation of these two theories can influence the creation of new roles in the Web 2.0 realm. Over the course of the data analysis, further roles will be discovered and then placed into the present model, which will be modified to reflect the study’s findings (see in the section 5.1).

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

In the first part of this chapter we present the results derived from the data collected through netnography that was conducted on fitness and healthy lifestyle blogs and as well the data derived from interviews with bloggers. The results will be presented by providing a detailed description of each of the roles that were discovered throughout the research. Finally, we will conclude by discussing both differences and overlapping qualities among the bloggers' roles.

4.1 Introduction

It might be useful to start this chapter by reinstating the research question: *What are the roles of the bloggers in Web 2.0?* To answer this question, 14 fitness and healthy lifestyle blogs have been examined. Most of the bloggers were American and all demonstrate a strong passion for fitness and healthy lifestyle. After completing the process of netnography and reaching data saturation, we realized that all the examined blogs and all the interviews that we conducted were with female bloggers. Female bloggers were not purposely chosen, but throughout the search for influential blogs in the Web 2.0 realm, the researchers encountered a larger number of fitness blogs written by female authors. However, as the issue of gender was not strongly co-related to the research question at hand, at this point, no assumptions will be made with regard to gender displayed in the blogosphere. Thus, to answer the research question, the following blogs were thoroughly examined in the process of netnography:

Table 2: Overview of fitness blogs chosen for the study

Blog	Name of Blogger	Profession
Best Body Fitness	Tina R.	Professional, fitness trainer
Blonde Ponytail	Jessica A.	Professional, Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS)
Chic Runner	Danica	Hobbyist, social media manager for fitness company
Fit Chick in the City	Jess U.	Professional, running coach
Fitnessista	Gina	Professional, fitness instructor
Fitness Test Drive	Amanda V.	Professional, fitness professional and writer
Losing Weight in the City	Theodora B.	Hobbyist, social media strategist and freelance writer
Love, Life, Surf.	Christine Y.	Hobbyist, freelance consultant and writer

Miss Zippy	Amanda L.	Professional, running coach and freelance writer
MizFit Online	Carla B.	Professional, personal trainer, writer
Neon Blonde Runner	Katherine	Hobbyist, nurse
Peanut Butter Fingers	Julie	Professional, fitness instructor and writer
Run Gia Run	Gia A.	Professional, running coach
The Skinny Confidential	Lauryn E.	Professional, fitness instructor

For the majority of the observed bloggers, blogging is a full-time occupation together with personal training and coaching. To answer the research question and determine the roles of bloggers it was crucial to organize the data obtained around major themes and patterns. To aid us in this process, a strategy of coding and re-coding was used, which helped us to narrow down the possible themes. This coding method entailed major communicative practices that could be seen in blogs, namely interaction with others, information sharing, and personal reflection (Page, 2012). Thus, we went on to analyze these interactive practices that were conceptualized in the selected sample of fitness and exercise blogs. For instance, we looked for different ways of interactions between bloggers and their readership, such as questions asked by bloggers to their readers at the end of their posts, thus inviting them to participate and contribute to the blog's content. Other interactive features that we searched for included readers asking questions in the comment section and the respective response by the blog authors, since we argued that interactional behavior revealed the social roles and hierarchies in the blogosphere. For example, an opinion leader blogger is designated by the act of posting a seed message, but is also expected to produce follow-up posts (such as thanks, provision of further information, or evaluation) in response to the developing messages in the comment section. The characteristics of an opinion leader blogger will be further described in detail under the section blogger as opinion leader (4.2.1).

Further, for the theme of bloggers as inspirers, meanings containing certain words such as "inspiration" and "motivation" were considered for deeper insight. Here, the readers' tone of voice was acknowledged, whether it was rather affirmative and cheerful rather than critical or opposing the view of the blogger. Also, each blogger's tone of voice was evaluated in that regard, particularly when talking about their areas of expertise such as work-outs and

product reviews. Moreover, supportive comparisons of shared experiences were noticed, where the blogger's opinion was echoed by their readers ("like you", "me, too", "I have the same...", "agree with you").

With regard to the communicative practice of personal reflection, the choice of words used in the "about me" section was observed which reveals the self-description and self-conception written by the bloggers. It became evident that many of the blog authors are aware of their multiple social roles such as fitness professionals, writers, and mothers. As for the reason behind their blogging, many mentioned motivation, reader encouragement, and also considering blogging as a potential platform for spin-off jobs or brand collaborations. In addition, the frequency of hyperlinks was acknowledged, on the one hand, as evidence for alignment and connection with other bloggers, thus hinting at the networker role of bloggers; and, on the other hand, the use of hyperlinks as a means of providing information and introducing a particular product or brand to the readership.

From this process of coding and re-coding it has been concluded that the bloggers roles develop through overall communicative practices. Taking this notion as a point of departure we can determine that the main roles detected throughout our data analysis include bloggers acting as opinion leaders, information providers, product introducers, brand advocates, networkers, and inspirers. The theoretical underpinnings that were used to aid the researcher in determining the roles will be discussed under each of the proposed roles.

As the roles were emerging, we decided not to present them by discussing each blogger individually, but instead chose to illustrate and elaborate on each role and its characteristics through selecting quotations from the data gathered in order to support our results and findings. However, during the analysis stage we analyzed each blogger individually, but decided not to present the empirical material in this manner due the fact that each blogger possesses more than one role and discussing each of them individually would create repetitiveness and information might become cumbersome.

4.2 Results

In this section, an in-depth analysis of the findings from the data collected through both netnographies and interviews will be presented. Based on the overarching common communicative denominator among all of the bloggers' roles and the theoretical framework from both role and communication theory, a detailed description and analysis for each of

the emerging six roles will be provided and elaborated on. When analyzing these roles, multiplicity of roles, a concept taken from role theory, was taken into consideration to determine if bloggers assume more than one role. At this point it must be stated that we started out using a deductive approach, as we resorted to communication theory that points out the characteristics of internet-based communication. Moreover, when discussing the role of bloggers as opinion leaders, there were inferences to theoretical work on roles from the field of sociology. This theoretical framework helped in backing up the inductive exploration of all further roles.

4.2.1 Bloggers as Communicators

Since blogging is considered a form of communication, the underlying role of the blogger as communicator has already been suggested in the theoretical framework chapter. Throughout our research, it became apparent that all the roles that bloggers assume in the course of interaction with readers occur through a process of two-way communication with their followers. Communication is key in the bloggers' realities and it is argued that the more interactive and present the bloggers are in readers' lives, the more roles they are likely to acquire through this relationship. Hence, the blogger as communicator was chosen as an overarching role that is contained in all additional roles that bloggers assume in Web 2.0. It can be stated that bloggers assume the role of a communicator through both streams within role theory, the functionalist as well as the interactionist approach. This is due to the fact, that through communication bloggers take on certain roles through the active participation, but, at the same time, certain roles are being imposed on them by the readers in the blog.

Interaction and collaboration

Bloggers such as *MizFitOnline*, *Miss Zippy* and *Fitnessista*, having the largest audience among all bloggers chosen for this study (Kred, 2013), are highly involved with their readers; while analyzing their blogs one can see the back and forth interaction between the parties. Some of their posts attract more than 60 comments, which are further discussed, not only with the blogger, but also with the fellow readers. The comments exemplify the decentralized two-way communication described in the theoretical framework. This constant, highly interactive communication defines the roles of the bloggers and acts as the key for positioning themselves in the blogosphere. Without the interaction with the readership, these roles would not have emerged. This importance of the audience is further confirmed by blogger

Gia from *Run Gia Run* (2012): “As it turns out the best thing about having this blog is YOU guys. You readers are phenomenal. You send the sweetest messages to me”. The blogger expresses her appreciation to her readers and thus recognizes how this “two-way flow decentralized” communication (Alcatel-Lucent, 2006) enables her to become part of the readers’ lives and on the other hand, allows them to actively influence her blogging activity.

The continuous two-way communication between the blogger and the readership can as well be seen in the blogger posing questions to the readers at the end of a post. The questions invite readers for a dialogue and are always open ended. For example, the blogger *Blonde Ponytail* (2013) urges her readers to connect with her:

“Your turn: Have you tried Quest Bars? What’s your latest read? I need a break from all the pregnancy books I’m reading!”

In the same manner, *Fit Chick in the City* blogger Jess (2013) encourages her readers to share their individual work-out routines with the others: “Let me know in the comment section what workouts you’re committing to this week”. By posing these kinds of questions, the blogger starts a conversation and signals her readers that her role is not only to provide the readers with information but also to listen to their opinions, read comments, and engage in conversations with them. This process stresses the characteristics of communication of Web 2.0, as it is highly interactive, includes two-way communication, and involves more than one party. At the same time, readers do not hesitate to express their opinions, agreements, and disagreements, and quite often respond to the bloggers questions. This, in fact, reiterates the overarching role of blogger as communicator. Among one of the many comments to *Blonde Ponytail’s* (2013) question listed above, one of the readers answered:

“I’ve been wanting to try these bars so bad! I’ve also read some awesome reviews on them. I might have to go pick out a couple flavors next week!”

The reader displays agreement with *Blonde Ponytail* and proceeds by stating more personal details. Hence, the readers know that they are being heard because bloggers welcome them to join the conversation and make sure the readers feel integrated in the activity of blogging.

Additionally, the bloggers respond to both negative and positive comments, which is crucial for the readers, as this demonstrates the blogger’s willingness to accept constructive criticism and to face “hard” questions. This back and forth interaction displayed in the comments differs from traditional communication where the audience does not have the

possibility to express their opinions and provide feedback. Due to this engagement and close connection with the audience the bloggers can assume stronger roles in their readers' lives compared to traditional communicators. Often, bloggers become a major part of a reader's life when they read a blog on a daily basis and wait for the blogger to publish a new post or comment back on a reader's question.

Bloggers themselves admit that communication is the crusader that leads and directs them in their lives as bloggers. Through communication bloggers not only develop professionally but also receive career opportunities, which, as indicated by Amanda of *Miss Zippy* in her interview, would not have been possible without blogging. Communication is the key to success in social media and a number of bloggers explored in this study, have a professional background in writing, which they admitted helped them to succeed in their blogging career. The reality of Web 2.0 permitted bloggers to assume multiple roles and attain space in the social media realm. Thus, each role that the blogger acquires throughout this highly interactive communication process will be described in the next sections of this chapter.

Bloggers' Communication through Storytelling

Another facet of the blogger's role as communicator is the way in which they communicate content to their readers. As previously mentioned, the pursuit of fitness activities has become a significant cultural trend in Western societies over the past decades, where physical self-improvement in the form of increased fitness or an enhanced aesthetic appearance is often closely related to the construction of the self (Featherstone, 1982). Thus, the stories that people tell about themselves online in the context of their fitness activity leads to another aspect of the communicative role of the blogger: the practice of storytelling. According to Escalas (2004), "people create stories to organize their experiences, create order, explain unusual events, gain perspective, and make evaluations" (p. 168). Hence, blogs serve their authors as a platform for chronicling and making sense of their lives.

In online spaces such as blogs, in particular, bloggers have access to a large audience to provide them with a considerable space platform for storytelling. The bloggers present a narrative, whereas their blog audience functions as listeners. It is postulated that storytelling, as seen in blogs, comprises either textual stories or visual stories embedded in photos, illustrations, or videos. In this study, however, we focused on the textual form since

it enables an analysis of the explicit storytelling as a means of communication, depicted in the blogger's words and meanings. While analyzing the blogs, we noticed how, and in which context, the two terms stories and storytelling were brought up by the bloggers. For example, *Love, Life, Surf* blogger Christine (2012) perceives the sharing stories as the essential purpose of her blogging activity:

"I share stories about my experiences as a mom of two young boys who is trying to balance work, fitness, family and healthy living, and the lessons that I've learned through these experiences. [...] While I might not be a professional athlete, I treasure the opportunity to share my story as a way to lift up others who are also everyday women and mothers and who are working to fit it all in while running/swimming/surfing/yogaing their hearts out."

Her statement indicates that through her storytelling, she builds up trust with her audience, as she wraps up her own experiences in stories that the readers can relate to. Further, she believes that readers return to her blog *"to hear about my stories and about my experiences. I think my role is really that one of a storyteller and a cheerleader"*. Her fellow blogger *MizFit online* (2013) has the same intention behind her blogging, as she includes the reader in her self-definition as a storyteller:

"Until a few weeks ago I'd have happily said: I'm a blogger. Until a few weeks ago, that is, when [...] Shauna reminded me I'm a teller of stories.[...] These are the stories I'm called to share because they're about me and they're about you. [...] I am a storyteller who's currently using the medium of blogging to weave her tales."

Further, narrative strategies in the blogs were explored, in the form of what Kozinets *et al.* (2010) have described as "character narratives" which refer to enduring personal stories or accounts that may be regarded in relation to particular character types. For instance, bloggers may portray themselves as a "champion" who has successfully battled personal issues. In that regard, we examined the bloggers' writings in terms of whether they display a narrative of conflict and struggle. Since many of the observed bloggers are mothers, they tend to address the challenges of balancing family life, work, fitness and a healthy lifestyle in their writing. On her blog *MizFit Online* Carla (2013), writes that "[s]torytelling...blogging...is about entertainment, normalizing life experiences & stories [...]". Hence, bloggers aim to give a realistic account of their lives, often in a humorous manner. Consequently, the blog audience seems to relate to narratives that offer genuine, honest accounts of human life. A common denominator among all of these narrative strategies is that they all involve creating

a personal story, sharing intimate anecdotes, and inviting the readers to take a “sneak peek” into the bloggers’ real lives. The stories help the bloggers to build awareness, empathy, and trust among the audience. Through the communicative means of stories, bloggers are able to establish a connection to readers by allowing them to fit their own experiences into the story.

Moreover, bloggers continue to attract the attention of their readers as their life stories naturally evolve. This evokes a high level of loyalty and familiarity with the bloggers’ lives from the readers’ perspectives who want to keep up to date with the bloggers and “read the next page in their stories”. Whereas one could argue that communication through storytelling is rather one-sided, it also entails elements such as co-creation and co-authorship. In a comment on *MizFit online’s* blog (2013), reader Gigi addresses the opportunity to contribute to the blogger’s storytelling through interaction and thus, becomes part of the activity:

“For me, there’s something about blogging that brings together so many kindred spirits sharing their experiences. Everybody has their own distinct story and I love how we can all weave it into this patchwork quilt that keeps us together – inspired and better off for knowing each other.”

This notion indicates the readers are not only passive listeners but may also be involved as the bloggers invite them to share their own stories as well. On the other hand, bloggers may be able to reinforce and strengthen their positions and roles within the social hierarchies of the blogosphere, through narrative interaction. Hence, if the stories told resonate with the readers’ lives, they can establish an emotional connection to readers that, in turn, will form the basis of long-lasting relationships.

In conclusion, it can be inferred that the written communication contained in their blogs serves as the crusader leading and directing bloggers in their lives. Through their communicator role, bloggers not only develop professionally but also receive career opportunities, which as indicated by blogger Amanda (*Miss Zippy*) in her interview, would not have been possible without blogging. The reality of Web 2.0 has permitted bloggers to assume various roles and attain a dominant space in the social media realm. Thus, each role that bloggers acquire throughout this highly interactive communication process will be described in the following section of this chapter.

4.2.2 Bloggers as Opinion Leaders

As briefly discussed in the introductory chapter, we argue that bloggers assume the role of opinion leaders in the online world. This notion has already been confirmed in previous scholarly work (Segev *et al.*, 2012), which, in accordance with our abductive research approach, leads us to take this role as established. Through the research it was affirmed that this role is more closely related to the symbolic interactionist stream of role theory than the functionalist one, due to the fact that bloggers obtain this role through constant interaction with their audience and through the constant display of their expertise.

It is crucial to develop an understanding of how bloggers establish themselves as online opinion leaders, as this determines their position in the social system within the Web 2.0 landscape. Throughout the analysis of the results, this assumption that of one of the bloggers' roles is being opinion leaders was confirmed both by the way bloggers perceive themselves as well as by how readers see them. When discussing the characteristics of bloggers as opinion leaders in the first chapter, it was indicated that a bloggers authority develops through the relationship with their readers. Over the course of the study, we found that this relationship not only contributes to bloggers becoming opinion leaders but also lays the foundation for the emergence of the blogger's role as a networker.

Opinion leaders were previously defined as individuals who possess the "ability to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way" (Grewal *et al.*, 2000) who, because of their expertise and knowledge of a certain domain, are likely to be perceived as more informed and trusted by others (Van der Merwe & Van Heerden, 2009). By providing examples from the collected data, we were able to demonstrate that these opinion leader characteristics also apply to bloggers who take on that role. In addition, two sub-roles of opinion leadership emerged: first, the blogger as an influencer and second, the blogger as an expert. However, for the purposes of this study, the roles of opinion leader, influencer and expert are seen as one role, as they are highly intertwined. For example, in phrases such as *could you suggest* or *could you shed some light*, readers not only seek an opinion but also expert knowledge and are likely to be influenced by the blogger's response. Therefore, all blog entries used in this study were analyzed for the *opinion leadership* role, which included those posts indicating expertise and influence. To illustrate this, words, phrases, and questions that signaled how bloggers perceive themselves as opinion leaders in the fitness field and which demonstrated that readers visit blogs for their authors' expertise, were

extracted. During the analysis process and the observed interaction between blogger and reader, the following words and phrases were encountered (see table 2). These exemplify the role of opinion leaders from both a reader and blogger perspective.

Table 3: Opinion leadership blog extractions

Words by readers	<i>Could you suggest</i>	<i>Do you think this is a good idea</i>	<i>Could you point me to the right direction</i>	<i>Could you shed some light</i>
Words by Bloggers	<i>As a running coach, I am going to argue that</i>	<i>I would give the product the following grades</i>	<i>What you should invest in</i>	<i>A good sports bra is something you probably need</i>

The examples shown in the table above present a clear indication that bloggers assume the role of opinion leaders, experts, and influencers in Web 2.0. Readers appear to reach out to bloggers for advice, information, and validation of their own opinions, as opposed to searching the web or browsing through corporate websites. Further, readers appear to be more comfortable in asking for information from bloggers when it comes to exercise routines, products and gadgets. In general, opinion leadership is based on a person’s special expertise and knowledge on particular topic. Hence, these individuals seem to distinguish themselves from their readers through demonstrating familiarity with a certain area and thus, appear to understand a domain better than novices in the field.

Many of the bloggers observed in this study are fitness professionals. They have obtained specific certificates or degrees that allow them to teach classes and work as a coach in their area of expertise. For example, *Miss Zippy* blogger Amanda is a certified running coach and has 15 years of running experience and thus, is perceived an expert within this field. She refers to the running boom of the last years, as new beginners are seeking information about running online:

“I think through my blog I can give them my voice of experience when it comes to running [...] they are learning as they read as they read things on my blog my blog.”

Through her blog, she offers her expertise to the audience and gives them tips for improving their performance in the respective exercise field. This can also be observed in *The Skinny Confidential* blog (2012), where some of the readers ask for concrete advice:

"I am a fitness freak and healthy eater but I do have a problem. I have been a soccer player my whole life so I get them [those] thick soccer legs. Two years ago I became conscious of my healthy habit and dropped 25 pounds. But my legs just don't seem to slim down how I want them to. Any pointers???"

Blogger Lauryn (2012), who also teaches classes at a gym, replies by recommending "Pilates![...] Light resistance, lots of water, and cut back on dairy. Also lots and lots of stretching". The notion that readers increasingly turn to bloggers with specific personal issues could also be observed on the *Fitnessista* blog (2012):

"My question is do you think crossfit is sufficient enough for weight loss? With my background do you think it is something I should/could do?! I might add too, I've had 2 c sections so my core strength is poor. Any input would be great!"

These kinds of questions showcase that readers trust bloggers and that they rely to a certain extent on their opinion and expertise. Thus, through their responses, the blogger not only provides their audience with free consultation from a professional fitness expert, but, at the same time, strengthens their own authoritative status. Once the bloggers suggest a certain exercise, health routine, or a product, the reader will most likely feel encouraged to follow the recommendation. Moreover, bloggers give advice and review products based on their background and knowledge as fitness professionals. Thus, prior to making a purchase decision, readers may turn to bloggers for an opinion such as in Christine's blog (2013):

"I've been looking at the Relay Capris from Athleta and wondering if I want to invest the \$\$\$. You said you love them...are they worth the \$\$\$? I'm also considering a pair of Saucony capris which are half the price. Dilemma."

Blogger Christine (*Love, Life, Surf*) then reacts to this question by giving an account of her personal experience with the product:

"I do really like the Relay capris. They are my favorite pair. I like how they fit, especially in the waist and I don't have to adjust them and it doesn't pinch. [...]"

Hence, it can be argued that bloggers, as online opinion leaders, are perceived as more knowledgeable than others and thus, become a trustworthy source of information for their readers. They obtain that role by building an interactive relationship with their audience, which, in turn, helps them to establish trust and enhance the credibility of their words and actions.

However, sometimes the readers consult bloggers with questions that should rather be directed toward doctors or physiotherapists. This again stresses the influence that the

bloggers possess and may even be an indication for that the bloggers' expertise may, at times, be more valued than that of a doctor. As it is mandatory for all bloggers in the United States to provide their readers with disclaimers (which is mainly due to the high probability of lawsuits resulting from the possible emanation of bad advice), they stress the fact that they are not doctors or nutritionists, nor do they have the necessary experience to offer medical advice and thus, cannot take full responsibility for the advice given. Nevertheless, readers continue to direct these types of inquiries toward bloggers, which can be seen, for example, in the comment section of the *Fitnessista* blog (2013) where a reader turns to blog author Gina for medical advice:

"I was hoping you could shed some light on correcting fitness imbalances – particularly for the back and shoulders. I have been to doctors and they don't seem to be concerned with this."

The blogger replies to this inquiry by referring to her experience and what action she has taken to battle these health issues:

"Does it hurt you to strength train? it might be worthwhile to see a neuromuscular therapist. my rhomboids and pecs [pectorals] get extremely tight and painful, and the cnmt [Certified Neuromuscular Therapist] helps SO much".

Hence, she does not provide the reader with a consultation but instead recommends that the readers see a professional therapist, who is more knowledgeable to handle the issue. However, the reader still looks up to the blogger and awaits their reply before taking further action. By responding to the reader's question, the blogger reassumes her role as an expert and influencer to the readers.

The perception of bloggers as opinion leaders is not only shared by readers and other fitness experts, but also by companies who, at an increasing rate, contact bloggers to ask them to review new products since they believe that people are more likely to listen to the bloggers' opinions. In marketing terms, the individuals who purchase and try products first are referred to as being product innovators. The role of the blogger as product introducer will be discussed later in this chapter (4.3.3) but it must be noted that the two roles have certain overlapping characteristics. For instance, blogger Carla (*MizFit online*) received a new pair of yoga shoes for reviewing and after a trial period offered an honest account of the advantages and disadvantages of the product to her readers. It becomes apparent that bloggers act as 'pilots' who trial diets, fitness routines, and gadgets before others start to

utilize them. In her role as an influential expert, she discussed design, technology, and functionality and thereby demonstrates to her readers that she is familiar with the product and that they can trust her expertise and thorough evaluation.

Aside from delivering information, bloggers also tend to share their personalities, habits, and preferences with the audience and thus, are likely to exert influence on their readers' behaviors, whether it may be making exercise-related choices or purchasing decisions. In the *Chic Runner* blog, some of the comments following a product review on running shoes reveal the extent to which bloggers' opinions might impact their audiences. This is reflected in the reader's choice of words when they disclose how the blogger's opinion caused them to change their attitude towards a particular product (Chic Runner, 2011):

"I was totally skeptical, too, but the fact that you love it is making me want one so badly now!!!"

"I'm really glad to hear more positive opinions about K-Swiss, so thanks for putting this out there! I had my doubts at first, but once I saw you [...] running in them, I knew they had to be a solid show."

In these examples, the blogger's knowledge is emphasized and can be confirmed through examining the words that the bloggers used to display their authority. During this research, bloggers using phrases such as *"you should invest in"*, *"you will probably need this product"*, or *"what's nice to have but not needed"* signaled the blogger's expert voice through which they speak to their readers. Further, these choices of words highlight an essential part of their blogging practice, as it stresses the blogger's belief that that they have knowledge and expertise that is worth sharing with others. During our interview, blogger Amanda (*Miss Zippy*) recognized her own expert status, which she has obtained in the blogosphere over the past years:

"Again, I am going to go back to that voice of experience I guess, it's how I see myself in the running community. So yeah, that's how I've been perceived and this is kind of my niche within running, if you would break it up that way."

Another distinctive feature displayed by opinion leaders is their ability to reach out to a broad audience. According to the Kred (2013) ranking of the Top 50 Fitness Bloggers, *MizFit online* may be categorized as an "A" list blogger. Obtaining an "A" list status enables a blogger reach out to more readers, influence them to take action, and spread bloggers' messages. After each post, bloggers receive a large number of comments in which readers

reflect on the product, bloggers' personal stories and workout routines. Further, their ability to engage with the audience was observed on other social media channels that are connected to the blog, such as Twitter or Facebook, as the blogger's posts are retweeted, replied to, or followed by using these media. This interaction demonstrates that readers are highly involved; they do not only read the posts, but also make contact with the blogger and thus reveal, how the bloggers, as opinion leaders, impact their decision-making processes. Concluding, it can be stated that the trust required for bloggers to assume this particular role of being an opinion leader, creates the foundation of a strong relationship between blog author and reader. Trust is essential for all roles that bloggers assume; hence, it will be reviewed in the conclusion part of this study.

4.2.4 Bloggers as Information Providers

One of the more apparent roles that the blogger assumes through the course of interaction with their readers is one of an information provider (Chai, Das & Rao, 2011). Since the core purpose of many of the blogs is to provide readers with variety of information, the researchers discovered this role through the use of the deductive approach. Additionally, this role can be seen as an expectation the readers place on the bloggers as they seek new knowledge through visiting blogs. This ties back to role theory and particularly the functionalist stream within the field of role theory, which indicates that society has the tendency to set certain role expectations for individuals (Biddle, 1986). Moreover, information exchange is ongoing between all blog participants; this showcases the decentralized communication flow due to fact that all participants have an equal opportunity to interact with the blogger.

Bloggers provide their readers with detailed information about new fitness routines, nutrition, fitness apparel, different fitness events and gatherings, fitness gadgets and much more. Readers express their appreciation of the blogger's activity, which could be seen, among the comments found on the *The Skinny Confidential* (2011) and *Run Gia Run* (2012) blogs:

"Great site! So much information on health and fitness. Can't wait to see more...."

"I'm thankful i found your blog cause it's a source of useful information of all sorts! I'm also thankful i got to meet you in person and get to run with you every week!"

By making these statements readers showcase that they access various blogs to discover new information as they associate bloggers with being online information providers. As mentioned before, many of the roles discussed in this chapter are closely intertwined. The role of an information provider appears to be closely related to product introducer since both roles offer detailed accounts of knowledge to the reader. However, information provider can be seen as a general role, which entails the dissemination of information whereas the role of the product reviewer is more strongly related to specific brands and products discussed in the blog posts.

An additional manner through which bloggers provide information is by answering questions to the various inquiries posted on their blog. Readers posted the following questions on *Skinny Confidential's*(2012) blog:

"Hi there! Love your blog. Looking to get a great blender, which one would you recommend?"

"Where can I get those pink shoes at? are they at the nike store? or do you have to order them off line??"

In fact, these type of reader requests in which they ask where to information on where to find a certain product, its price, or even more personal questions, could be found on all the blogs examined for this study, To conclude, bloggers provide information to their readers on a daily basis either through a post or by answering to various inquiries in the comment section following the post.

4.2.4 Bloggers as Product Introducers

Throughout the research, it became apparent that quite often bloggers introduce new products to their readership through writing product reviews and blog posts. This role was not assumed by the researchers but was determined through an inductive approach as it emerged from the collected data. At this point, it may be argued that this role is more closely related to symbolic interactionist role theory, since bloggers through constant interaction and decentralized communication with their readership build up an audience that they can influence through their posts and reviews. While interviewing some of the bloggers whose blogs were investigated over the course of the study, they reported that companies are approaching them on average of once or twice per week offering them to write a product review. Some companies compensate bloggers for writing reviews, while others just provide free samples. For example, *Fitnessista* blogger Gina (2013) who in her

review of the latest drink introduced by the vodka brand Smirnoff reveals the company's compensation in her disclaimer below the blog post:

"This post is sponsored by Smirnoff Sorbet Light. I was compensated for my participation, but would have loved to try the new flavors either way, especially since they don't contain artificial colors or fake/added sweeteners".

By disclosing the sponsored nature of the post, the blogger demonstrates that she is acting on behalf of the company as she introduces their new product to her audience. Through her review she presented it to the readers, discussed its benefits and offered various recipes for making cocktails using the new product. It can be assumed that the company wanted to involve a third party to talk about their product in order to target individuals with an interest in fitness and healthy lifestyle, since this drink is tailored for the "health conscious" consumers. Gina might have been selected based on her influential status in the blogosphere; with a large audience following she has been featured in influential fitness publications such as *Fitness, Glamour, Health & Diet* and *Shape*. Thus, by engaging with bloggers and getting them to write a review, companies might be able to attract new consumers to try their product or even generate online word-of-mouth and buzz about a particular product. Through the research it became apparent that, more and more people trust bloggers' reviews rather than corporate marketing and advertising because they believe that bloggers are more trustworthy, that they can easily interact with them and their vested interest is significantly lower. One of the readers responded to Gina's product review by indicating interest in the product and a subsequent purchase intention (2013):

"I am so glad you reviewed these new flavors. I was wondering how they taste, what was in them, and which one to try first. I am definitely getting a bottle soon! Mango sounds delish! Thanks! I'm sure it was a tough job, but Hey! Someone had to do it!"

In the above quote, the reader referred to the opportunities bloggers have as they are being provided with products for trial and reviewing, and stated to how grateful they were for this particular product review. This underlines the importance of the reviews to the audience and emphasizes the reader's perception of the blogger as an expert. It is the expertise and experience that allows bloggers to influence their readers. From the majority of the comments following product reviews it became apparent that readers benefit from reading about new products as they get to decide on the basis of that review whether they would like to try it or not. However, readers do not only praise bloggers for providing reviews but

also express their negative opinion about the products introduced by bloggers, such as seen in the *Fitnessista* blog (2013):

"I think diet alcohols are ridiculous. Vodka doesn't have that many calories to begin with. It's a disgusting, patronizing marketing scheme."

This comment illustrates that after all, blogs serve as forums for open discussion where readers have the chance to voice their disagreements with brands and their products. This characteristic differs from traditional advertising where consumers can only watch the ad but do not have the opportunity to provide instant feedback. Hence, bloggers should welcome all opinions from the readers since the purpose of the blog is not to review new products but rather to encourage conversation, inform and educate readers in particular areas of interest.

Additionally, not all blogger reviews are describing the upsides of the product, often bloggers tend to mention why they do not like a certain product and thereby demonstrate their honesty and unbiased opinion. For example, *Miss Zippy* blogger Amanda (2013) who in her review on Kellogg's protein bars included a list of its down sides:

"Where I think it falls a bit short, however, is in some of the ingredients. To begin with, it only has three grams of fiber per serving. I prefer something with at least five grams. Sugar is the third ingredient listed, so that's not so great".

It is rather unlikely that a company that is going to launch a new product will list the down sides of a product but will only emphasize its benefits. The blogger however, has the right to review both the negative and positive sides and companies are aware of this risk when sending out products to bloggers. Readers, in turn, appreciate reading a more personalized and less biased review from a blogger. Sometimes the products being reviewed are not sent by the company but bought by the bloggers themselves, such as in the case of *Chic Runner* who purchased a new product by Nike called hatphones [annotation: caps with built-in headphones] and shared her experience with the readers by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the product. As a response to the product review one the readers wrote (2008):

"Great post! I love the hatphones! I was just waiting to get your feedback on them before I could decide whether to ask for them for Christmas or not. So glad to hear that they are so cool."

This comment illustrates the extent to which the bloggers, as a source of unbiased information about products and gadgets, actually influence their readers' purchase decision-making process. In case the blogger is compensated for the review, they still promise their readers to remain truthful and express their sincere opinion regardless of the business relationship with the company. During our interview blogger Amanda (*Miss Zippy*) mentioned the issues of trust:

"I try very hard to stay very neutral and truly give my readers the true deal. Because I think the readers are going to see through it, the readers trust you, you have this community of trust that is already built up and I don't want to abuse it".

When it comes to paid reviews, the readers still appear to trust the bloggers and believe that their opinion is unbiased and truthful. It is implied that the likelihood of consumers trying the product increases if readers trust the blogger and believe in them. Bloggers value their readership and are aware of the fact that if they bombard the readers with products reviews, especially biased ones, there is a high probability that the readers might lose interest and will not return to the blog. Hence, bloggers are seen increasingly careful when choosing products for reviewing and try to offer an ambivalent opinion by discussing both the up sides and down sides.

Sometimes the bloggers do not even know that they will be receiving a product to review and it hits them by surprise. Companies increasingly resort to unconventional methods to attract bloggers since they receive so many different offers that companies need to distinguish their offer from those of other companies.

"I came home and found a mysterious, super lightweight package. It was the brand new Kinvara 4, which is not going to be released in stores until May 1st, 2013. Wow. Speechless."

It is further inferred that bloggers appreciate being given an exclusive opportunity that enables them to establish themselves as an introducer of product prior to a launch. Additionally, it reiterates the fact that bloggers often receive products before it is being commercially released and showcases the power that bloggers possess in the online environment.

All of the given examples underline that the blogger plays the role of a product introducer in Web 2.0. Companies and readers trust bloggers who in turn appreciate having the opportunity to review products that they personally enjoy and that fit with their lifestyle and

blog. Apart from reviewing the product for the sake of the readers and the company, bloggers get to test new fitness apparel, equipment and other fitness related products. However, most bloggers indicated that they carefully select only those products for review that will be of interest to their readers. For most of the bloggers examined, the focus lies on the added value and benefit that they can provide for their audience by introducing new products to them.

4.2.5 Bloggers as Brand Advocates

Over the course of the study, it became evident that many of the observed bloggers are official brand ambassadors, which calls for a closer examination of this role. One of the observed characteristics of brand advocacy is that it requires its representatives to demonstrate passion for the brand and to display a high level of commitment. Moreover, it is argued that the intrinsic motivation for brand ambassador bloggers is to make recommendations based on their positive experience with brands and to “selflessly” help others by sharing testimonials and promotional offers with their readership. Those individuals that fulfill the above-mentioned criteria and show eagerness to promote and support the brand are chosen by companies to act as an ambassador to the outside world. For instance, this can be seen in *Miss Zippy* blogger Amanda’s (2013) enthusiastic tone of voice when talking about the products she champions as an official ambassador for the brand:

“Since I’m an Oiselle ambassador, love their clothing, and have an outlandish amount [...] of it, I thought I’d share some of my favorite Oiselle pieces. [...] there isn’t a week that goes by without my wearing some piece of Oiselle clothing. One of my favorite things about Oiselle is that much of their clothing can go sweat to street and back again. I also love the fabric of their line—it is the softest, most comfortable material to throw on. Truly, my closet and drawers overflow with Oiselle and that makes me happy.”

In her statement, the blogger repeatedly stressed the brand name and the perceived high quality of the product based on her frequent use of it. Further, she indicated that she wants to share her evaluation of the brand with a larger audience. The advocacy is thus brought forward by the advocate’s authenticity and sincere conviction in the brand, which stems from previous experience with the product.

Additionally, some of the bloggers observed were seen as proactive and outspoken in their quest to become official brand advocates. For example, blogger Gia (2011) expressed her

enthusiasm and loyalty in a post on running skirts and thereby signaled her willingness to represent the brand on a long-term basis:

“My favorite place for skirts is Lululemon. I think they have perfected the skirt. I recently bought the full tilt skirt and I’m in love. They are a little pricey, but I have had some of my lulu skirts for almost 5 years and they are still going strong!! (disclaimer: they did not pay me for that plug – but LULU if you’re listening, I’d like to be an ambassador!!)”

About a year later, in October 2012, the blogger revealed on her blog that she had been chosen to become the brand ambassador for the company, by participating in photo shoots and promoting the brand’s clothes both in an online and offline context. In that sense, the construction of a professional partnership with brands is built on how the bloggers as highly satisfied consumers incorporate the brands into their lives.

In terms of communication, two levels of interaction were noticed: Firstly, there is the internal communication with the brand. In most cases, the collaboration and interaction originates from the companies who contact bloggers and ask them to become advocates of their brand. By engaging with bloggers who are already fans of the brand and thus are likely to talk positively about specific products, they can effectively generate brand awareness among the blog readers. In reference to functionalist role theory, bloggers in their role as brand advocates, have to act according to the expectations placed upon that role. Thus, they cannot depart from this role but must show enthusiasm and defend the brand in front of others. Yet, most of the bloggers examined stated that they only partner with brands or companies that they believe in and which they perceive to be a good fit with their readers. For instance, *Love, Life, Surf* blogger Christine (2013) who during our interview claimed to base her decisions regarding brand collaborations on the following notion:

“The brand/company has to fit me and my blog and be something of interest to my readers. My first obligation is to my readers. The brand/company also has to be something that I genuinely like/already use or am interested in.”

Further, she notes that trustworthiness is increased *“if it is for a product or brand that I truly am passionate about, that I’ve talked about and raved about, that I use regularly, I think that lends more credibility to the review/content being published”* (2013). Through brand advocacy, companies may aim at building a relationship of trust with satisfied and loyal customers that are likely to spread the word. Hence, bloggers as a brand advocate defend the brand mainly through their blog, but also through other social media channels, such in

the form of Tweets, Facebook posts or through YouTube testimonials. The two-way communication entailed in the usage of these media presents the second level of interaction as it allows the readers of the blog to ask questions or share their own experiences with the brand in question.

4.2.6 Bloggers as Networkers and Relationship Builders

Throughout the process of analyzing the data, the role of the blogger as networker and relationship builder became apparent, as the fitness and exercise blogging community is to a great extent characterized by its networking aspect. Through their online interaction with each other, bloggers establish a common ground for discussion and thus, create a strong network, which allows them to share their passion for fitness and a healthy lifestyle, exchange information, and mutually support one another. All in all, the role of bloggers as networkers becomes evident in the ways bloggers interact with one another both within and outside the online world, but also how they resort to other social media channels in order to promote their blog and to communicate with readers and fellow bloggers. In reference to interactionist role theory, it is indicated that the role of the blogger as a networker evolves through social interaction and thus, is the outcome of constant, communicative negotiation between individuals, in this case between bloggers and their readers but also other fellow bloggers. This reciprocity could be observed in various ways, such as bloggers' commenting on each other's posts, linking to each other's blogs via hyperlinks or featuring each other in respective guest posts. In one of our interviews, *Miss Zippy* blogger Amanda expressed the importance of building this network:

"I don't think you can be a blogger without going to other blogs. I mean, this is how I built my community to begin with. Every day I spend an hour or an hour and a half in the morning sitting and reading other blogs [...] I think it's a very giving and supporting community and we are all helping each other".

Her statement indicates that the continuous following and commenting of other blogs is essential for establishing long-lasting networks. In addition to these rather informal, socially constructed networks, a majority of the observed blogs displayed badges revealing their membership to designated blogger networks such as *FitFluential*, *BlogHer*, or *EmpowHer*. This is also a sign of the increasingly professional nature of the networks established by the bloggers. Belonging to one of these organized networks offers them further opportunities to increase their outreach and become more professional in terms of blog advertising and making their blogs profitable. For instance, as part of the *FitFluential* blogging network,

bloggers are provided with products for reviewing and compensated for writing and get the opportunity to participate in social media campaigns or audition for long-term partnerships with brands (FitFluential LLC, 2013).

Moreover, it has been observed that networking does not only take place online, but is at the same time increasingly being transferred to the offline sphere, such as taking the same fitness classes or exercise together, attending special blogger events or organizing blogger meet-ups before particular events such as marathons. Katherine from the *Neon Blonde Runner* (2013) perceives that her role as a networker is to a great extent based on the shared interest and common enthusiasm for exercise and health exhibited in the fitness blogosphere:

“But I gotta say, hands down, the main reason that I love blogging is because I get to connect with other gals who share a similar passion for life and running that I do”.

Since many of the bloggers' lives revolves to a great extent around fitness and exercising, no matter whether they are professionals or hobbyists, the blogger network offers them an opportunity to exchange information with likeminded people. In one of her posts, *Run Gia Run* blogger Gia (2012) expresses her gratitude for the networking aspect of blogging through which she has made new contacts and friendships: *“I am so grateful for the friends, virtual and local that I have made. Point in case, Eliana. She comes to the Lululemon run club that I lead on Wednesday nights.”* In the same way, blogger Jess (2013) acknowledges the enormous networking potential that her blogging activity has generated:

“This blog has changed my life. I knew nothing about the blog world and all the doors it would open for me and the friendships that would be made [...]”.

A common notion expressed in the statements above seems to be that friendships between bloggers or readers always start virtually, before eventually developing in the offline world through meeting in person. For instance, *Neon Blonde Runner* blogger Katherine (2013) who, in her best networking manner (including hyperlinks, praising a fellow blogger, and directly addressing her audience), suggests initiating an offline blogger meeting prior to a marathon:

“Kate from the wonderful blog SoCal Runner Gal and I were recently chatting about the fact that we MUST organize some sort of meet-up amongst all us blogger runner buddies”.

Her readers and fellow bloggers react in a cheerful, positive way to her proposal, thus highlighting the potential power of blogs as networking tools. Moreover, the subsequent comments disclose the curiosity and interest in the blogger's offline persona, as they express how much meeting in person would mean to them:

"I am years away from running Boston but hope that I can still join a meet up with some blogger friends soon. I absolutely love meeting other nuts like me"

These reactions in the comment section once more indicate the networker's ability to encourage and gather people in a shared experience. The networking continues as bloggers feature each other in guest posts, thereby complimenting or filling in white areas where their "colleagues" have more expertise and thus, boosting one another.

Another point of observation is the fact that bloggers as networkers embrace social networking as an opportunity to spread their blog and connect with their readership and other bloggers. All of the observed blogs displayed plug-ins or badges linking to their accounts on one or more social media platforms, with Twitter or Facebook being by far the most popular. For example, blogger Christine (*Love, Life, Surf*) mentioned in our interview that she sometimes tweets readers when responding to a post or just to say thank you. Further, she stresses the importance of being active in social media for blogging:

"I'm most active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Less so on Pinterest and Google+. All are essential and compliment my blog – being known as a credential resource and "expert" in certain areas, building my image, brand and message. They also are essential in promoting my blog and my blog posts."

Hence, the use of different social media contribute to strengthening the blogger's role as networkers, as it they make the blog to become more accessible on a smaller scale and in real-time, without having to read a whole blog post or writing lengthy comments.

Personal Relationship Builder

Part of the role of networker, is the role of bloggers as relationship builders, as they create relationships, both personally, with readers and other bloggers, and professionally, with companies and brands. According to the notion of Fournier (1998), relationships involve reciprocal exchange between active, independent relationship partners and thus, provide meaning to the individuals who are engaged in them. Starting with personal relationships, many blog authors interact with their readers on a very personal level, almost as if they were

a friend. Besides being a fitness expert, *Fitness Test Drive* blogger Amanda in her interview considers herself as an average person experiencing products, *“like I am a friend advising them on the best products based on my testing them out”*. This notion of equivalence of blog author and reader can be seen in the bloggers posing questions related to their posts, thus seeking their readers’ reassurance and encouragement regarding particular topics. The personal relationship aspect can also be observed when referring to events in the past that loyal readers are familiar with or readers refer to it themselves, such as noted in the *Love, Life, Surf* blog (2013): *“Some of you may remember that I was supposed to run the MORE/FITNESS Magazine half marathon last April when I got sidetracked by injury.”* Blogger Christine then asked her readers for advice whether she should run in a race that year. The subsequent affectionate, encouraging comments display a high level of intimacy and insight into the blogger’s private life, given the fact that most bloggers and readers do not know each other in person:

“I was just going to say what Jobo did – depends on your goals, or if just finishing, after your surgery last year, is goal ‘enough’.” (Tracy)

“I worry about you so I’m going to go with you running it as late as possible and that Ed [annotation: blogger’s husband] has you under his eagle eye to make sure you’re not pushing yourself or your newly improved knee too hard”. (Kristen)

However, building up these kind of personal relationship requires time, meaning that the readers must have followed the blogs over a certain amount of time in order to gain more knowledge about the blog author. The bloggers themselves can enhance this process through inviting dialogue and participation in the comment section by asking direct questions to the readers. Also, this can be achieved through real-time response to comments, which is incorporated by almost all bloggers observed in this study. *Fitness Test Drive* blogger Amanda (2013) notes that *“[i]f it’s a positive comment, the comment back is easy to write. If it’s not a positive comment, I try to connect with the commenter on a point they made and then maybe offer an additional point of view”*. This statement confirms the importance of supporting and allowing open discussion on the blog. Nevertheless, the overall tone of voice in the blogs observed is supportive, rather than critical. Once, a personal relationship is built with the reader, a certain level of trust is established. The issue of trust plays a crucial role in the blogosphere and thus, must not be underestimated by brands as they try to employ bloggers as intermediating medium for promoting their products.

Professional Relationship Builder

In terms of professional relationship building, *Miss Zippy* blogger Amanda (2013) reports business opportunities that have arisen out of networking activities with other fellow bloggers. Through partially expanding the conversation-taking place on her blog to the micro-blogging platform of Twitter, she has managed to attract the attention of a company producing fitness gear:

“I feel like it’s silly, but I’ve built some relationships that started through Twitter. Again, I’m going back to that treadmill example [annotation: The blogger received a treadmill from a company], they have found me on Twitter. It was a conversation I was having actually with Carla Birnberg [MizFit Online] and another blogger and the three of us were talking about these [treadmills]. The company saw us chatting about it and came to me and you know, we worked out a way for this to happen”.

In this particular case, the company jumped right into the online conversation between the bloggers, realized a business opportunity and thus, provided them with their products for free. But bloggers are also seen as increasingly pro-active and straightforward when it comes to approaching brands and companies. As many of the observed bloggers are also active as freelance writers, some have caught the attention of editors of fitness-related magazines and publications and thus, were able to expand their writing beyond their blogs. For instance, *Fitness Test Drive* blogger Amanda (2013) even states that her initial intention behind starting a blog was promoting her writing skills:

“[...] The purpose was to educate other fitness pros on fitness writing, marketing and publicity. I also wanted to use the blog to build a platform as an expert in these areas and to indirectly sell my fitness writing and marketing products. In 2010, I started another blog [...] geared to fitness pros and consumers, where I review fitness products. Again, this is to help me build a platform as a fitness expert and magazine writer who can write product reviews.”

As mentioned before, a majority of the observed bloggers is part of the *FitFluential* blogging network. Hence, bloggers can benefit from being a *FitFluential* ambassador not only by being partnered up with companies but also by being introduced to several healthy living and fitness publications, and eventually writing and producing video posts for their digital publications. Other bloggers have developed spin-off careers thanks to their blogging activity, thereby combining their passion for fitness and a healthy lifestyle with their

expertise in the blogosphere and other social media platforms. Such is the case of *Chic Runner* Danica (2010), as she tells her readers about a new job opportunity:

“I am super excited to share with you guys that [...] I will be taking a job with ICR, which stands for International City Racing. [...] I can’t believe that my blog turned into something and now I will be doing marketing, event planning and social media for them. It basically is my dream job and I’m still pinching myself about the opportunity I have in front of me. Running, social media, writing, all things I LOVE!”

The blogger’s willingness to enter a professional relationship within the fitness industry, once more illustrates the high level of involvement displayed in this particular blog genre, as fitness and exercise account for a major part of the bloggers’ lives.

Lastly, the blogger’s networker role is connected to the role of a relationship builder, which can be subdivided into personal and professional relationships. It is argued that especially these days, building relationships in the social sphere is critical to the blogger’s success. Success in that sense does not only imply achievements in the professional realm such as landing a writing job, brand ambassadorship or even a real job, but also obtaining a long-term relationship with their readership which in turn, is crucial for future networking through blogs.

4.2.7 Bloggers as Inspirer

One of the most noticeable reoccurring patterns observed in this particular blog genre were the inspirational messages spread by the bloggers. According to an entrance in the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) the word ‘inspire’ means “to fill someone with the urge or ability to do or feel something”. Hence, we argue that bloggers assume the role of an inspirer, someone who is capable of infecting other people with their enthusiasm and passion for a subject and thereby, encourages others to take an action or make a conscious lifestyle change.

In order to underpin the role of bloggers as inspirers, the tone of voice was measured through the words that were used by bloggers to describe their mission. Tone of voice is seen as a reflection of their attitude toward the people they are addressing and also toward the subject in question. These frequently mentioned words included sharing “passion”, “joy”, “excitement” and “enthusiasm”, with the goal to “inspire”, “encourage”, and “lift up” others. The usage of these terms indicates the cheerful, encouraging tone of voice of the blogger, thus revealing a benevolent attitude towards the reader. This can be seen in the

following example taken from *Neon Blonde Runner* in which blogger Katherine (2011) elaborates on her motives for blogging:

"I write because I want to share my enthusiasm and excitement with other people and inspire them to dream about pushing their limits...and then run with it."

Thus, the content shared by bloggers includes everything related to their specific areas of interest, from running or yoga workouts, to healthy lifestyle tips in the form of recipes, up to more general stories related to their everyday lives. While it is implied that the underlying motivation behind the content sharing entailed in the role of bloggers as inspirers is based on their passion for fitness-related issues, others consider sharing their knowledge almost as an obligation towards their readership. Hence this role relates back to both the symbolic interactionist and functionalist streams of research theory, since bloggers on the one hand want to inspire others out of their own desire, and on the other hand they feel that this is expected of them in their role as inspirers within the blogosphere, as demonstrated by *Best Body Fitness* blogger Tina (2013):

"I knew I wanted to share the same passion and determination with others. Which leads me to now. My chance to do just that. To give back some of the life fitness has given me. To allow you to experience that same rejuvenation."

This statement may also hint at bloggers' overall empowerment, as they recognize the extent to which they are increasingly capable of influencing and shaping their audience. In fact, blogger Christine (*Love, Life, Surf*) claimed during our interview that she feels obliged to act as a "cheerleader" to her audience. Thus, bloggers' role as inspirer might be based on a set of expectations placed upon them by due to their position within the blogosphere. Moreover, blogger Majja (*Motivationsbloggen*) indicated that the purpose of her blog is to write about motivation, to provide people with tips on how to keep up the motivation and to make people realize the joy of exercising.

The readers' response to the inspirational messages spread by the bloggers can be observed in the comments. However, these reactions can be divided into inspiration in a rather generic sense on the one hand, and inspiration related to more concrete fitness and healthy lifestyle choices on the other hand. Through this constant, interactive communication all actors involved in the fitness blogosphere inspire and motivate one another.

Bloggers as inspirers manage to connect with their readers, as they encourage them to develop a positive outlook and attitudes towards life in general. This notion is confirmed in the comments where the readers praise the bloggers' positive approach to life and fitness and enjoy reading their respective blogs because of the "spiritual" benefit they obtain from it. The following quotation selected from the *Love, Life, Surf* blog (2012) illustrate the bloggers' traits as successful inspirers, as they exert an enlivening influence on their readers:

"I love that you inspire me to get out there and live life to the fullest by trying new things to stay healthy and active. I love who you are as a woman and a mom! It was truly love at first sight when I landed on your blog. You just make everyone feel welcome and your spirit infects ours!"

Further, bloggers manage to motivate their readers in becoming active in determining one's own destiny through actions, whether it may be starting their own blog or trying new things that might be out of their comfort zone. In addition, bloggers of this particular genre create inspiration in direct relation to concrete fitness and healthy lifestyle changes. Through their comments, readers report how the blogger has inspired them to start exercising on a regular basis and eat healthier. Moreover, it is revealed how the inspirers become part of the reader's work-out routine and thus, assist them in pursuing their fitness aspirations, which can be seen in the comments on Gia's (2012) *Run Gia Run* blog:

"[...] that post you did about giving 100% stayed with me for a while, so on Friday when I was considering skipping my workout I went to the track instead for speedwork."

Also, some readers have been inspired to follow the bloggers' footsteps by engaging in the same fitness practices and establishing similar goals, such as running a marathon:

"I have been reading your blog for a while now and you never fail to inspire me! I'm training for my first marathon right now so it's great to read your stories and advice."

Additionally, bloggers create various fitness challenges for the readers to follow. For example, blogger Gina (*Fitnessista*) created a summer shape up program as well as a four-week bridal boot camp to encourage and motivate her readers to become active. By providing free and easy access to these features, the blogger enable their readers to exercise without cost. Hence, bloggers as inspirers are also considered a more realistic role model, as they struggle with injuries, not finding the time to work out, prepare healthy meals or keep of weight. For example blogger Theodora (*Losing Weight in the City*), who through her

weight loss and consistent lifestyle change encourages her readers to do the same which is expressed in one of her reader's comments: *"I personally find inspiration from people (like you!) who are walking the walk and not just talking the talk [...]"* (2012).

Concluding, the bloggers' role as inspirers is quite powerful, as their words and expressed attitudes have a substantial impact on their readers' lives and continue to provide motivation for pursuing their fitness endeavors and to experience the benefits of incorporating an active and healthy lifestyle. Also, this implies why readers return to the blog as they continue to strive for inspiration and motivation.

4.3 Discussion of Roles

The aim of this research was to discover the roles of the bloggers in Web 2.0 and through the analysis the researchers defined and confirmed six different roles under the overarching communicative role. It was demonstrated that the common denominator for all of these roles are either established or emerge through social interactions occurring through communication within the blogosphere, as well as the role expectations that are placed upon bloggers by their readers or by themselves. The social actors include thus not only bloggers and their readers, but also other fellow bloggers and companies that seek to employ bloggers as intermediaries for their marketing efforts.

After having presented the six communicative roles that bloggers acquire over the course of their blogging practice - opinion leader, information provider, product introducer, brand advocate, networker, and inspirer – one can identify both differences and overlapping qualities among these roles which will be presented in the following sections.

4.3.1. Brand Advocate vs. Opinion Leader

The two roles of bloggers as opinion leaders and brand advocates differ in many ways: Whereas opinion leaders in the blogosphere tend to be influential bloggers who are defined by the size of their audience, brand advocates are rather characterized as being highly satisfied consumers that are subsequently chosen to act on behalf of a brand because they are likely to recommend and promote the brand. While bloggers in their role as opinion leaders are focused on disseminating messages to a large audience, brand advocates are eager to help their readers on a more personal, amicable level, for instance through sharing promotional offers. Furthermore, opinion leaders seem to base their ability to influence others upon their knowledge and expertise within a particular domain. In that regard,

opinion leaders may appear less committed to the product or brand in question, but focus more on wielding their influence by spreading information to a larger audience. In contrast, bloggers acting as brand advocates ground their activity on genuine passion and enthusiasm for the respective brand or product, which they want to share with their audience. However, in order to exert their role as brand advocates, bloggers also need to possess the characteristics displayed by opinion leaders such as being extraverted and recognized within their field.

4.3.2 Opinion Leader vs. Product Introducer

Additionally, the roles of bloggers as opinion leaders and product introducers have overlapping characteristics. Prior to becoming a potential reviewer for a company and introducing their products, one needs to first assume the role of an opinion leader in the Web 2.0. People tend to trust the reviews of bloggers with a larger audience, greater experience and more exposure on other media networks. Hence, it is argued that these two roles complement each other and reviewing products for influential companies and being asked to introduce a brand's products will further enhance the opinion leader status of the blogger.

4.3.3 Info Provider vs. Product Introducer

The roles of the blogger as information provider and product introducer possess overlapping qualities since both entail the blogger to disseminate information in the online environment in order to reach the audience. To ensure that the readers return to the blog, the posts of both product introducer and information provider have to be of interest, relevant, and appropriate for the blog genre. It can be stated that by reviewing a product, the blogger simultaneously provides information to their readership, which makes the two roles intertwined.

Nevertheless, one must acknowledge the differentiation between these two roles: When it comes to bloggers as information providers it can be seen that bloggers' posts tend to cover everything from personal stories, motivational quotes to fitness apparel. The area of discussion remains very general and the manner in which the blogger writes about a certain area of interest is more casual. The blogger does not critique the product as much but instead, provides the readers with a general overview.

In contrast, bloggers discussing and introducing products tend to be very specific, critical and objective in their posts. They approach the subject more carefully since they are aware that their review is likely to influence the purchase behavior and product usage of their readers. Product reviews often follow upon companies' request, whereas the role of information provider is rather based on the blogger's own accord and willingness to post about various topics. Even though the roles do have overlapping qualities, due to the differences discussed above the researchers decided to consider the two roles separately.

4.3.4 Product Introducer vs. Brand Advocates

These two roles also possess both comparable and contradicting qualities. Both brand advocates and product introducers familiarize the readers with various products. Another similarity can be seen in the monetary compensation or free product samples that both product introducers and brand advocates receive to present their product on the blog.

However, not all product introducers act as brand advocates for a particular product or brand. The product might be of interest to them but it can be one amongst many other ones that the blogger reviews. In contrast, blogger as brand advocates display a much stronger feeling towards a certain product or brand, which often is the only one in their category the bloggers are utilizing. This also applies to bloggers becoming official brand ambassadors for a company, which might in certain cases demand them to sign a contract stating that they can only represent their brand only to avoid conflict of interest. Due to these differences in attitude toward the product or brand, these roles are seen as separate.

4.3.5 Inspirer vs. other Roles

When comparing all roles that have emerged throughout the analysis process, it occurs that some roles can be seen as having common features, while others appear to be more different from each other. The roles of bloggers as opinion leaders, information providers, product introducers and brand advocates may be assigned to one joint communicative hub, as they all imply the notion of the blogger as an individual who through his or her position has the ability to disseminate an opinion or information to others. It is through networking that the blogger connects with other individuals involved in the field of fitness. Thus, through their role as networkers, bloggers might become influential which, in turn, is likely to provide them with the opportunity to become brand advocates, product introducers as well as information providers. Often, the bloggers receive this information first-hand which

places them in superior position to their readers. By passing on their knowledge, the bloggers may exert strong influence on their readership.

In contrast, the role of the blogger as inspirer can be considered separately it does not focus on the blogger spreading specific information on products or brands. Rather, it is based on the bloggers' personal 'desire' to help and motivate others individuals through their blogging activity. Again, this underlines the notion that bloggers have an actual impact on their readers' lives as they support and encourage them in their daily lives.

4.3 Reflections on the Multiplicity of Roles

Even though six prominent roles have emerged throughout our research, not every blogger assumed all of these roles. This observation can be explained by the fact that individuals do not necessarily acquire multiple roles at once. Rather, the most important is that the roles taken simultaneously remain authentic and consistent with the image bloggers want to portray to the audience. Each blogger has a unique persona and communicative style which serves as an explanation for the differences between their roles. Some bloggers may put more emphasis on motivation and inspiration through their posts while others combine their opinion leadership role with product and brand reviewing. However, in most cases bloggers were seen assuming more than one role, which again links and reiterates the multiplicity of roles previously discussed in role theory.

In conclusion, it can be stated that all roles derived over the course of our data analysis, possess both overlapping qualities and differences. The theoretical and practical implications of the bloggers' roles together with the modified theoretical framework will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

5. Conclusion

This final chapter serves to summarize the main aspects of the findings with regard to the research question and purpose presented at the beginning of this research. Hereafter, the practical and theoretical contributions of the study are presented and following the study's limitations, suggestions for future research are provided.

In this study we identified a gap in the existing literature on the different roles of bloggers in Web 2.0. With its high level of involvement and interaction among participants and its frequent display of consumption habits and brand narratives, we found the blogosphere

surrounding fitness and healthy lifestyle to be a rich, insightful ground for research. The study investigates the bloggers' self-definitions and perceptions of their role, their social interactions with the readers through comments about fitness and health-related practices, as well as posts on their blogging experiences and product reviews. Hence, our aim was to answer the following research question: *What are the different roles of bloggers in Web 2.0?*

The data collection approach using netnography enabled us to find answers to this research question since it provided access to rich empirical data, which we then collated with the data derived from interviews conducted with five of the bloggers whose blogs were observed over the course of netnography. Following an abductive and exploratory research approach, we first established theoretical underpinnings to serve as a point of departure for our analytical research. In order to assist the researchers in interpreting the data from both netnographies and interviews, a model incorporating existing concepts from both role theory and communication theory, was developed, which hence, helped in answering the research question.

The analytical part of our study illustrated the overall communicative activity of the blogger that is key to the emergence of roles within the blogosphere. The overall popularity of the blogs reviewed in this study stresses the importance of assessing the different roles that their authors assume through communicating and interacting with their audience. The overarching role of bloggers as communicators was derived through a deductive approach, together with the role of opinion leaders and information providers, whereas the roles of product introducers, brand advocates, networkers, and inspirers emerged inductively throughout the data analysis.

Over the course of the research, it was emphasized how social interaction helps in building relationships between all actors involved in the blogging activity. Once these relationships start to form, the issue of trust comes into the picture. Blog readers are more likely to trust the opinion of bloggers that they are familiar with, after having followed them for a longer period of time. Since the blogging community is based on relationships, the notion of trust could be observed within all roles and serves as the binding glue keeping the blogosphere and their individual actors together. It can be stated that all of the observed bloggers value

the trust of their readers and strive to remain authentic in order to maintain the image of a trustworthy source for their readers.

5.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the expansion of existing scholarly work on blogging by providing a detailed typology of bloggers' roles against the context of fitness and healthy lifestyle blog genres, which entail high involvement and engagement of its audience. Moreover, fundamental insights about the characteristics of the protagonists in the blogosphere are presented. Ultimately, a new approach to research on bloggers was established by connecting traditional communication theory, including its adaptations to the new exigencies of Web 2.0, to role theory from the cognate discipline of sociology and anthropology. Within role theory, researchers distinguish between two perspectives, the functionalist and interactionist approach which promote concepts of the social construction of the self, identity, and self-perception, relating to how bloggers perceive themselves as they engage in the activity of blogging. The roles identified in this study were based on both approaches, arguing that the bloggers' roles are established through social interaction which, in turn, occurs through communication. Again, communicative practices and characteristics of the blog medium in Web 2.0 were emphasized.

Our contribution to the research field of blogging thus consists of the findings, which disclose the social roles assumed by the actors in the blogosphere. The findings of this study confirm the applicability of existing sociological concepts to individuals' roles, which serves to explain and situate the impact of bloggers within their respective domain. The roles that were identified approve to a certain extent previous studies on bloggers as opinion leaders (Segev *et al.*, 2009), which was taken as the study's initial point of departure and thus helped us to see additional roles that have emerged through communicative practices the bloggers engage in as they interact with their audience. The adapted framework found below shows how merging of role theory and communication theory together with their theoretical elements have led to the emergence of the blogger's communicative roles in Web 2.0.

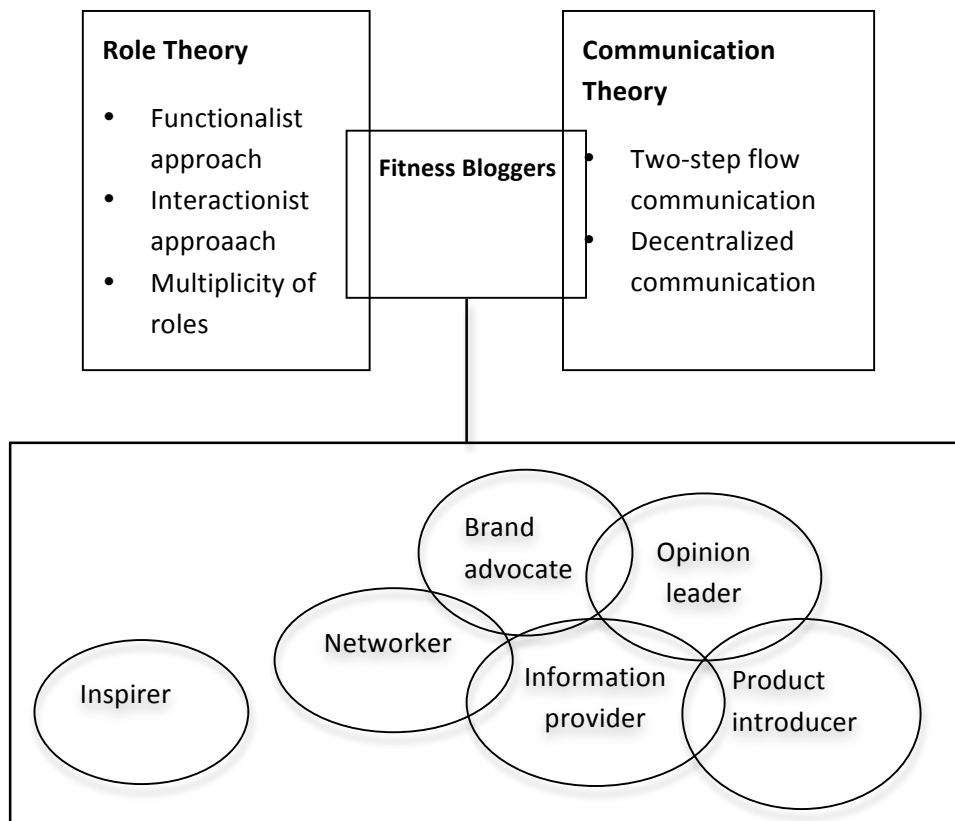


Figure 3: The emergence of new roles through the interplay of role theory and communication theory

The framework was expanded by adding six blogger roles, all of them being subordinated under one common communicative denominator. The positioning of the individual roles within the framework indicates their interconnectedness. For instance, opinion leader, product introducer, information provider contain characteristics similar the ones entailed in the role of the brand advocate, which thus are more closely related to each other. In contrast, networker is placed in distance from other roles because it displays fewer overlapping qualities. Lastly, the highly distinct characteristics revealed in the blogger’s role as an inspirer led us to position it apart from the others. All in all, these new roles of the blogger in the Web 2.0 environment offered new insights on social interactions within the blogging phenomenon.

5.2 Practical Contribution

The findings from this research affirm the notion that blogs present rich opportunities for marketers to “enter” the conversation between bloggers and readers who are both potential consumers. Since marketers try to engage people into a real conversation around their product or brand, they increasingly turn toward new media channels, which allow interaction and two-way flow of communication. This implies that they need to start paying close attention to the social actors involved in these new platforms of communication. Thus,

developing a deeper understanding of the online actors' different roles may aid practitioners in addressing them in a more adequate manner. Plus, an increased awareness of the respective blogger's communicative behavior allows for a more systematic, targeted selection and approach of bloggers for marketing purposes.

As consumers become highly involved and active in the social media realm, companies need to take into consideration that bloggers are more frequently seen as the new information resource in the consumers' purchasing process. This can be considered as a confirmation of the power shift from traditional media to the blogosphere. Hence, acknowledging the roles and the power of the bloggers provides companies with the opportunity to employ them in their marketing efforts in a more efficient manner. For example, as companies create new strategies to target a new consumer niche they can employ bloggers to act as intermediaries between the company and the consumer. In that regard, utilizing blog authors as intermediaries may become a strategic tool for brand placement since they may raise awareness, for, and better position, a brand. In the marketing context, this presents an opportunity for brands to embrace bloggers in their role as communicators. Through the means of storytelling they can include products and brands as they report their own lived experiences and thus, assign certain roles, actions, and relationships to brands (Fournier, 1998). Hence, through encouraging bloggers to include brands in their communicative storytelling, companies might be able to build an emotional bond with their consumers.

According to Technorati's 2013 *Digital Influence Report* (Swartz, 2013) bloggers are the third most powerful online influencers of purchase decisions, after retail sites and brand websites, with almost a third of the consumers claiming that their decision to buy a product is likely to be influenced by something that they read in a blog beforehand. This fact stresses practitioners' potential of engaging bloggers in their roles as influencers and using them as a source for marketing research. For instance, companies can "take the temperature" prior to a product launch through distributing their products in advance to selected bloggers, allowing them to assemble their potential future consumers' reaction and feedback. When it comes to the influence of the blogger on the consumer's attitude toward a brand, our research showed that the participants tend to react positively to posts featuring brands such as product reviews, but only if they were of personal relevance and involvement to the

reader. However, in the observed blog genre surrounding fitness and healthy lifestyle these preconditions were usually given, since they tend to attract readers with similar interests.

In their role as influencers, bloggers are likely to be perceived as more trustworthy and authentic than other sources of information. The notion of trust is considered essential for brands as they aim to build a long-term relationship with their consumers. Hence, approaching bloggers will enable companies to establish trust with their consumer by presenting their products via a third party's platform.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

Throughout this study, the researchers were able to answer the research question by discovering different roles of bloggers in Web 2.0. Nevertheless, there are several research limitations that need to be discussed and thus, will allow the researchers to point out opportunities for further research. Moreover, it is argued that since there is no previous comprehensive study on the roles of bloggers in Web 2.0, the researchers did not have access to a wide array of scholarly work covering this topic and thus, not all findings could be supported by previous scholarly work.

When deciding on what kind of blog genre to investigate, one needs to acknowledge that the ultimate choice of fitness and healthy lifestyle blogs and the distinct style of blogging displayed within this genre, may have affected the roles found throughout the research process. Hence, the nature of fitness blogs might predetermine and limit the scope of discovery of bloggers' roles. Therefore, studying another type of blog genre might lead to different insights and interpretations of the analysis.

Additionally, the gender bias demonstrated throughout this research can be seen as another limitation since all the emerged roles were derived from netnography conducted on female bloggers. Examining male bloggers may have created additional roles for this study. Hence, this gender bias can be seen as a potential opportunity for further research, which might shed light on the issue of gender in blogging and how this may affect the communicative roles of bloggers in the online landscape.

Due to time and resource constraints, only English speaking blogs were studied. Examining bloggers from other countries may have resulted in introducing different views on roles as

well as created more themes and categories prior to the data analysis process. Moreover, lack of resources did not allow the researchers to access professional software for analyzing qualitative data, which may have been useful to manage the information in a more effective manner. Furthermore, this limitation leads to another opportunity for further research: by employing a quantitative research method, the finding of this study might be further validated or may even point out further roles. Moreover, applying a quantitative approach to the study may make it easier to distinguish between the developed roles and may even break them down into additional ones.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Netnographic observation checklist

1. Blog characteristics

- Name of the blog/blogger
- Date of observation
- About section (what does it reveal about the blogger's self-perception)
- Blogging since (number of years)
- Authority/references to publications, other bloggers?
- Presentation of blog (does it contain text, photos, videos/vlogs etc.)
- Part of blogger network (Yes/no), if yes, which ones?
- Advertisements on blog (Yes/no)
- Is the sponsored content disclosed as paid? If yes, how?

2. Textual analysis of blog posts

In order to establish an understanding of the communicative practices, the tone of voice used in the bloggers' communication and interaction with their audience (comment section) will be analyzed in relation to the following three conversation subjects:

- Conversation about blogging: What is the bloggers' self-perception and reflection on the activity of blogging?
 - Conversation about exercise: How does the blogger establish authority? (references to other sources, experience, knowledge, fitness-related education, certificates, etc.)? How does the blogger integrate or encourage the readers?
 - Conversation about brand with consumers: How is the brand being talked about? How is the brand integrated into the blog?
-

Appendix B: Interview guide

1. Personal information/ Background

- What is your name?
- What is your occupation?
- When did you first develop a passion for fitness?
- For how long have you been doing this professionally?

2. Blogging activity

- When did you start blogging and what was the reason for it?
- In your opinion what is the purpose of your blog?
- What do you like to write about and how often do you post?
- From where do you draw the information for your blogs?
- Do you read other fitness blogs for inspiration? What interests you the most?
- What blog posts attract the most attention from your readers and what are they most interested in?
- When your readers comment on your posts how do you interact with them?
- Do you feel like you are adapting your tone of voice when talking to your readers?
- While blogging do you feel like you play a certain role for your audience, if yes what is it?
- What role would you like your audience to see you play? (e.g. influencer, content producer, expert/opinion leader, knowledge mover etc.)
- Are you active in other social media channels? If yes, which ones and how do they complement your blog?

3. Attitudes toward brands and blog advertising

- Have you been approached by brands asking to advertise your products? If yes, how often does this occur?
- If you decide to mention/ advertise the brand on the blog on what basis do you select brands/ advertisements to feature in your blog (e.g. fit with blog, brand, financial compensation, value to reader)?
- How trustworthy do you perceive product reviews or other brand-related content that you publish?
- What do you think is the reaction of your readers to this kind of content?
- When you promote products on your blog do you think it has an influence on the way the audience perceives you? If yes, to what extent?

Appendix C: Interview transcripts

Blog	Name of interviewee	Location of interviewee	Date of interview	Interview medium
Miss Zippy	Amanda L.	USA	April 24, 2013	Skype
Motivationsbloggen	Majja L.	Sweden	April 25, 2013	In person
Fitness Test Drive	Amanda V.	Canada	May 2, 2013	e-mail
Love, Life, Surf	Christine Y.	USA	May 4, 2013	e-mail
Chic Runner	Danica	USA	May 10, 2013	e-mail

Interview 1: Amanda L., conducted on April 24, 2013 (Skype)

Interviewer: What is your name?

Amanda L.

What is your occupation?

I am a freelance writer.

And you are also a certified running coach?

Correct.

For how long you've been doing that?

The coaching I've been doing for about 5 years and I've been freelance writing for about 15 years.

Ok Great. When did you first develop this passion for fitness and running?

That was also about 15 years ago, I would say.

Was there a special trigger for it, or?

I don't know, I guess it was just kind of a natural progression: I went to the gym a lot, started doing some inline skating and then got a bike and then decided a triathlon would be fun. So, for the past 15 years I've done a lot of triathlon, a lot of running. These days I am more into running but still do triathlon once in a while.

That's great. So when did you actually start blogging and what was the reason for you to start blogging?

So, I started to blog about, I guess it's been three years, I think in 2009, the fall of 2009, and I started basically because the type of writing I was doing was focused on more the logistics industry, so kind of dull and boring. So I found that I needed to find a way to be able to write about my passion about running and so I thought a blog would be a good way to showcase that I knew that I had knowledge about running and that I can use that to show editors at magazines, you know, hey I know I am talking about and I would like to write for you guys: here are some samples of my work. And then you know I think what I found and what most bloggers would tell you is that the blog takes just on a life of its own. If you spend a lot of time doing it and will take you in so many directions that you wouldn't expected.

It's great. So in your opinion you've mentioned and touched upon it before? So what is the purpose of your blog?

So these days, it's both a platform to write about running, you know running, it's such a passion for me and writing as well and it is a great marriage between the two. It's also, you know, I make some money out of my blog now, it has taken me into different directions that I never thought I would go. Here is an example, I am on this walking treadmill right now that was sent to be because of my blog, just to see if I like it and I am doing two blogs posts for them. You know so, you know different events ,trips, different things that I never expected, that's kind of what I am doing with my blog these days. So yeah, you just build this community and I think the interactions that I get with other runners and other bloggers, it's just fantastic.

We don't have it in our questionnaire but a question popped up in my mind, do you feel like your readers are mostly from the States or you also have international readers?

I have international readers, but the bulk comes from the states. I can look at my numbers and tell you, but the bulk comes from the States. But I've got my share of Australians, South Africans, Europeans... But the majority I am totally in the 90 some percent out of the States.

So, do you only write about running or there is something else you like to write about? And if so, how often do you post?

So, the majority of my writing is going to be running related, I cross over a little bit over to nutrition, a little bit over to overall fitness and a little bit the mommy blog because I have two children, but this is not very often though.

How often do you post usually? Once a day or few times a week?

I am probably in the 3-5 times a week range.

And do you read other fitness blog for inspiration?

Absolutely, absolutely. I don't think you can be a blogger without going to other blogs. I mean, I think this is how I build my community to begin with and every day I spend an hour and hour and a half first thing in the morning sitting reading other blogs.

Can you give us a few examples?

Of ones that I go to? Sure, so one - and she is a fabulous fitness blogger, she is probably on of the biggest of all - her name is *MizFit Online*. So, you know Carla is great, I go to one called *Blog Life Surf*. She does a mixture of, she does all kind of things:. She surfs, she runs, she does yoga. And then just lots of running bloggers, I can give you more running bloggers names if you would like cause there are definitely the bulk of where I go.

This is perfect, and it sounds that there is really this networking and community aspect in blogging.

I think it's a very giving and supporting community and we are all helping each other.

So, another question and it's about the comments that your readers post on your blog: how do you interact with your readers and what do you feel interests them the most?

I would say with my particular blog, because I am an experienced runner and right now we are going through this running boom and there are all these new runners who don't have much knowledge about running. I think they come to my blog to...they value the information that I can give them, my voice of experience when it comes to running. So that is where I see a lot of the comments and they are learning as they read things on my blog. I would say that is probably it, as far as interacting, if they post a question on my blog and comment I would e-mail them directly and answer their question.

So you are being the voice of authority? In that way, for running?

I guess so, it's an expertise, yes.

If we are talking about the role of bloggers, how do you perceive your own role in that way? If you interact with your audience and with your blog readers? How do you see yourself as a blogger?

Tough question. Again, I am going to go back to that voice of experience I guess, it's how I see myself in the running community. So yeah that how I've been perceived and this is kind of my niche within running if you would break it up that way.

And would you like them to see you? Also as a voice of experience? Or as an influencer? Opinion leader? How would you like your audience to see you?

I think that same way, that kind of my thing with my running. I've been around for long compare to this new runners, like I said there are so many new runners, and I got the country experience, I've got the been around the blog experience, and I like to feel like they can turn to me you know with their questions and looking to for training advice and things like that.

Fantastic. So if we take blogging more to the level of you know social media activities, we saw that you are on Twitter but are you active on other forms of social media channels?

Yes, I have a Facebook page, I have an Instagram account, Twitter by far is my favorite though and I would say in blogging each blogger has their strong platforms, you know, and I feel like I just stink at Facebook and I just don't even like it. Twitter I love and I grow my numbers pretty quickly on Twitter. Again probably because I like it and I engage quickly with it.

How come do you like Twitter so much?

I probably like the gravity of it and like that you can, it's brief but you can also link more detailed information to it if you want. I feel like it's silly but I've built some relationships started on Twitter. Again, I am going to go back to that treadmill example they have found me Twitter, It was a conversation I was having actually with Carla Birnberg and another blogger and the three of us were taking about these. And this company saw us chatting about it and came to me and you know we worked out a way for this to happen. So, yeah I just like Twitter.

You know they also say Twitter is a way of micro blogging, so you basically you take your big blog on a shorter level.

Exactly, and I think when it comes to writing I write shorter posts than some other bloggers do so maybe that's why Twitter is a good fit for me.

Now we are going to talk a bit about brands, since we just discussed it. So, how often you have been approached by brands asking to advertise their product?

What do you mean? Advertising in terms of paying me money to advertise their product on my page?

Like products that are being sent to you for reviewing or it can also be paid advertisement or product placement, it can be any form.

As far as companies approaching me to look at their product and review products, that happens all the time. I mean you would get several offers every week. I used to do and this kind of goes a long with the way blogging is going now, I used to do a lot more reviews and giveaways of products. I think that is a model that is still being used a little bit but not so much like it used to be. I personally

just get tired of it, it just gets old. So now again, as the model changes a lot, what I do if the company comes and says hey do you want to look at my product, I may go back to them and say hey, can we work together in a paid relationship and I will do a couple of blog posts for you or review your products and will ask them to pay me for that post.

But when they pay you, do you feel like you are being still being fully truthful about the way you feel about the product? Or you feel you become biased towards the products because you have been paid?

I try very hard to stay very neutral and truly give my readers the true deal. Because I think the readers are going to see through it, the readers trust you, you have this community of trust already built up and I don't want to abuse that. I am always going to disclose at the end of the post, we are required here in the States to disclose, even though before I was disclosing anyhow, "I was paid to review this" or "this product has been given to me for free" – whichever it might be.

Us: How do you select these products because you said that you have been approached many times? So what are your criteria?

Anymore, truly I give it a very hard look to whether or not it's something I would use. I mean, I get, for instance, so many nutrition products, you get so many of these nutrition products, there are so many new gels or drinks or things that you could use for training. I know what I like, I know what I am going to use and so I am not going to try out new nutrition products for the most part, unless it's something very, very different and unique, so I would say that's how, you know, I deal with it.

You know you've said it's all about trust and building on trust with your readership, so what do you think is the reaction of readers if you are doing give away or reviews? How is the reaction?

I think that when you are talking about a review or a giveaway you will get a lot of comments, people love that. If you are doing just a straight review it depends on what it is and whatever or not you are going to get you know as many comments. On the whole you don't get as many products just on product reviews. Unless it is again something very different, shoe reviews they like. With this treadmill, when I did the first treadmill review couple weeks ago, I got 62 comments, which kind of blew me away. Because I did not think it will have so much interest, it really did and sometimes you never know what people will respond to.

But do you still feel like people trust you as much even though the review has been paid for? You feel like the trust level is the same

I hope so, I mean I like to think so, I think that I don't do too many reviews. I do enough, I think they know my personality enough that they trust me, I hope so.

When you promote products on your blog do you think there is an influence on how your audience perceives you? Do you think that your role as a professional in the running field can be jeopardized by the paid content?

I think it can be if you go overboard, if I was doing like a review a week or if I was doing, too bias sounding in a review I think it could jeopardize it. I like to think I am striking it in the right balance without jeopardizing it. But that is my perception.

So it always in your head, you tried to think it through i.e. how much to post?

Absolutely, absolutely. Because the people didn't start reading my blog because of the reviews, they started reading my blog because of just the general running chat and now and so if I cancel that out with too much product reviewing, they are not going to keep coming back.

It has probably evolved naturally, every blogger has to start from zero, you don't have that network from the beginning and also this level of trust I suppose.

Absolutely.

Alright, I think, we're about done, thank you so much.

Interview 2: Majja Lundh, conducted on April 26, 2013 (in person, , Lund (Sweden))

So, I will do the first part, then Alix will take over. What is your name?

Majja.

What is your occupation?

Physiotherapist, slash health coach, and as well instructor. And I study as well, Master in sports medicine, physiotherapist.

Oh, wow. You're busy (laughs). So, you work here in Gerdahallen? For or how long have you been working here?

Two years (pauses). Three years, I think it's been three years. I'm not quite sure (laughs).

So between two and three years?

Yes.

And what classes do you teach?

Ehm, right now Afro, two classes a week, and Aerobics for... (turns to AB2) would you say beginner's level?

Yeah

...once a week. But I also to the Zumba, functional moves and step-up.

Ok, cool. So when did you first develop a passion for fitness?

Ehm, I think it was when I was twelve, actually, before that I just liked to be outside in the nature, building treehouses, and stuff, so I was active. But when I was twelve, I started running and then I realized if you run, you get better on, like, all sports in school. So I really liked it.

Ok, so for how long have you been doing this professionally?

Well, professionally, well when I was, like, thirteen, fourteen, I started a little dance group. I come from a town where we only had, like, 500 inhabitants, (laughs), so they were really glad that I wanted to do something for the kids. And then, I held other classes for children as well, a couple of years, and maybe when I was 15, I started doing Aerobics for adults. And when I was 17, I went to Spain and worked as an instructor, you know, like season work, just sports, all day long. When I got home, I

started working at the gym with classes for adults six times a week. As well I worked as, what do you say... in school as a teacher in sports. And then I moved her and started working here. Now I have two instructing jobs.

Okay. So, we know that you write a blog, so when did you start writing it, and what was the reason for it?

I started actually for a year ago because I thought it would be a fun thing to do together with my friends. I asked first, so I wanted to write why I do work out.. and then they were supposed to write as well. Some of them did and some of them didn't. So it was just a small blog, maybe for 20-50 readers a day, because I put it up on Facebook and then, you know, some people look at it. But then, maybe a month ago, I wrote to this magazine – I form – and asked if they wanted me to blog with (for) them. Then, they wanted that and now I blog there. So there's a lot of more readers, it's very fun.

How come you wanted to take it a step further, to writing for this magazine? To attract a larger audience, or?

Yes! I started to look at the statistics, because it's been on and off, for all the year, and then it was going quite good because I had a competition together with a company that sells make-up and then the statistics went up. And then I think I got, like, what do you say... I wanted more (laughs). More readers!

So, what do you like to write about? And how often do you post?

I post like... I used to post every day, but now I maybe post 3-5 times a week, because I'm so busy at jobs. I write about motivation, because so many people write about what they do, I don't feel the urge to do that as well. I avoid talking about food, because so many people talk about food. So I just write about easy tips and stuff to keep the motivation up. I try to just use the joy of exercising.

Okay. So, from where do you draw the information for your blog?

From my life (laughs)! I write every day, I realized, because in the mobile phone... I write. If somebody says something funny that I can use, I put it down immediately. If I go by something that I think looks funny, I take a photo immediately and then I collect everything and it becomes a But I do, what do you say, educate people about stuff, like strength exercises, then I can use the theory from that also.

And do you read other fitness blogs for inspiration?

Sometimes. Not right now, but I did, when time, I like to do it, but right now, I don't.

Do you have any favorite ones? Swedish or international?

Yeah, I like... there's my boss who works here, Anna Lindh. She writes a blog, 'Stilla eftertanke', I that one I like very much.

Yeah, we approached her and we hope that we'll be able to interview her, as well.

Yeah, great. She's in Portugal right now...She's busy,

That one, and then there is a colleague to her in Örebro, where I come from. Anna Duberg. She writes a VIP blog, super good, very good.

Do you know the blog 'Lofsan' [Lovisa Sandström]?

Say it again?

Lofsan? It's a blog from Stockholm, she is often on TV, TV4 and I thought you'd know her. But it's probably one of the biggest ones, there's many.

But I know about, like, PT-Fia, and these.

These are the biggest ones.

Yes, I like Jessica Clarén. She writes on a level, that I like. But a little much too much food... (laughs)

So what do you like in the blogs that you read?

In Jessica Clarén I like that she puts up daily boost, she calls it, and just she puts up some pictures that makes you happy. So these are the kind of things that I like. Boosts of energy and motivation

That goes into the direction of motivation, like yours. So, from your blog post, what do you think attracts the most attention?

What I've seen from the statistics, I think it is because I write once about failures that actually succeed. I think people like when things are a little bit, ehm, well when you fail, and that you can get up again, stuff like that.

Just to show that not everything is perfect

Yes, yes...

...and that you can overcome things.

Exactly. But also, when I wrote about, like, kangoo jumps, which is a new exercise form, that got a lot of views, when I wrote about Liverpool, and now I wrote about Berlin. So that's like things that interest a lot of people, when it's very clear.

Certain times as well, cause we also had a blog and we found that on special day if you write about it, you get so much attention Okay, so Alix will take over now.

We've been talking about your readers and what they like, do they comment?

Ehm, no, not very much. My mother does (laughs). But some of my friends, that do this thing where I work out.

And if they do, how do you interact with your readers?

I always respond.

You always respond? And do you feel you're adapting or changing your tone of voice if you are talking to your readers? Also, when you are writing the blog posts?

No, I think I keep the same one.

So you're being authentic?

Yes!

Being yourself, kind of. You don't have a different personality online and offline?

But you know, online I'm much more cheerful, because, that's also part of it, I don't think that [serious] issues, the blog isn't the right place to put up that kind of...

No negative feelings?

No, just keeping it simple and happy. And I do that as well in the comments.

So, if you're blogging, do you think you're taking up a certain role as a blogger? If you're writing about motivation?

I hope so, actually. Otherwise I wouldn't do it. **I hope to be an inspirer.**

That's great. Any other roles that you have in mind or is this the main one?

That is the main one, not like a role model or anything, I think because I don't even write what I do so you can't follow it. It's just to, you know, kick people, I don't know how to say it, in Swedish it would be "kicka igång".

Yes, give them a "boost" or a lift?

Yes, a boost!

So, to start working out or more in general?

In general, to feel good about themselves, and to see the glimpse of light in life and to think positive about, like, all things.

That's great.

I think that's very authentic, I'm like, I've got an overdose of positive feelings (laughs)

So, you mentioned that you see yourself as an inspirer, is this the only role you would like your audience to see or would you like them to see you as a role model as well? How about being an expert or opinion leader?

Maybe, a little bit as an expert, when you mention it, because I also put up that I am a physiotherapist, because I think it gives a little more strength to my words. Because maybe people think I have a scientific background.

Authority?

A little bit, yes.

And you mentioned that you, when you started blogging, put it up on Facebook. Are you active on any other social media channels?

No.

Like Twitter or something?

No, I tried but I didn't really get it.

Okay. But you connected Facebook to your blog?

Yes, I put up my post sometimes.

Now we're gonna talk a little about brands because it's also one of our points of focus. You said that you had, like, a contest or give away with a make-up company.

Yeah.

What kind of company was that?

It's a company called [...] medical. The thing is it's one of my best friends, she is doing the commercials, so she asked me if I wanted to collaborate with her.

Anything else? Have you been approached by anyone else?

Nope.

It's a rather small blog.

Yeah, and also, it's been up for only a month, and at I form, we are not allowed to do competitions and take in commercials.

Oh, okay, so nothing, no advertisement?

No, because they are a magazine and can't do that.

Of course. But if you had your own blog, regardless of the magazine, what product would you like to talk about? And how would you select them, based on what? Like if they fit with what you like, or with the blog, if they're valuable to the reader? What would be the main motivation?

Probably what's valuable for the reader, because the blog started for the reader, for my friends and for me as a fun thing. So probably something that I think they would enjoy, like the things from the make-up company, body scrub and stuff that you enjoy if you have worked out.

If we're talking about exercise products, what would that be?

Maybe I would like physiotherapist thinks, like a theraband, that kind of stuff, because you can use it so much, you know the Pilates ball. Something that a lot of people can use. And I would probably avoid very expensive brands because working out is for everybody.

Well, I think we're done! That was great, thank you so much for taking the time.

Yeah, that was fun!

Interview 3: Amanda V., conducted on May 2, 2013 (E-mail)

BLOGGER/SELF-CONCEPTION

What is your name?

Amanda V.

What is your occupation?

Fitness professional and writer

When did you first develop a passion for fitness?

When I started taking group exercise classes in undergrad university (early 90s).

For how long have you been doing this professionally?

For almost 20 years!

When did you start blogging and what was the reason for it?

I started blogging in 2007 with a Blogspot blog. The purpose was to educate other fitness pros on fitness writing, marketing and publicity. I also wanted to use the blog to build a platform as an expert in these areas and to indirectly sell my fitness writing and marketing products. In 2010, I started another blog with Wordpress (called Fitness Test Drive) geared to fitness pros and consumers, where I review fitness products. Again, this is to help me build a platform as a fitness expert and magazine writer who can write product reviews.

In your opinion what is the purpose of your blog?

To build a platform for myself and to educate, entertain and inform readers.

What do you like to write about and how often do you post?

- **From where do you draw the information for your blogs?** For Fitness Test Drive, I blog about fitness products that are new. I used to have to look for these, but now, I am contacted quite frequently from people who ask me to review a health or fitness product. So the topics have been coming to me lately (I do turn some down if they are not a good fit).
- **Do you read other fitness blogs for inspiration? What interests you the most?** I don't read too many other blogs, and if I do, they are not in the area of fitness. I prefer to read blogs for pleasure and not for work-related purposes.

What blog posts attract the most attention from your readers and what are they most interested in?

Blog posts about new products attract the most attention. Readers tend to be most interested in fitness equipment more so than DVDs or food.

When your readers comment on your posts how do you interact with them?

I don't get that many comments! I tend to get more comments through social media feeds (Facebook and Twitter). But when I do get a comment, I always try to respond back to that comment. If it's a positive comment, the comment back is easy to write. If it's not a positive comment, I try to connect with the commenter on a point they made and then maybe offer an additional point of view.

Do you feel like you are adapting your tone of voice when talking to your readers?

I blog in a style that I established for the blog (Fitness Test Drive), which is very conversational. I also write for a lot of fitness and women's magazines, so the writing is a little like that. But it's still more casual and more my style because I know I won't have an editor changing it! There are a lot of fitness blogs out there. I know that my professional writing skills help me stand out a little from some of the others.

While blogging do you feel like you play a certain role for your audience, if yes what is it?

I play two roles. One is of fitness expert. The other is the average person experiencing the product. So I can give a first-hand account based on experience and also an analysis of a product based on my background and knowledge as a fitness professional.

What role would you like your audience to see you play?

(Ex. influencer, content producer, expert/opinion leader, knowledge mover etc). Expert/opinion leader.

Are you active in other social media channels? If yes, which ones and how do they complement your blog?

Yes. I use mostly Facebook and Twitter. I also have accounts with Pinterest, Instagram and Google+. I only use Facebook and Twitter to promote my blog. I post links to new posts. I also present educational sessions at fitness conferences, including a session on fitness blogging that also helps me promote my blog.

BRANDS

Have you been approached by brands asking to advertise your products? If yes, how often does this occur? Advertise my products or their products? The former, no. The latter, yes. I am approached via email about once every two weeks from fitness pros or publicity people who want me to review their products.

If you decide to mention/ advertise the brand on the blog on what basis do you select brands/ advertisements to feature in your blog (fit with blog, brand, financial compensation, value to reader)?

Must fit the topic of the blog (health or fitness product). Must not be too gimmicky. Must not be supplements. Must be based on sound fitness practices. Must help active men and women continue to be active – help make fitness more fun or easier in some way. Must be new. Must be somewhat unique. I don't receive financial compensation for reviewing products, but I do need the product to test out.

How trustworthy do you perceive product reviews or other brand related content that you publish?

Depends on the blog. Some bloggers don't have any skills or background in balanced reporting and journalism.

What do you think is the reaction of your readers to this kind of content?

Hopefully they can detect when a blog review doesn't provide accurate reporting or appears sloppy. Not sure.

When you promote products on your blog do you think it has an influence on the way the audience perceives you? If yes, to what extent?

Yes, because I am sharing my personality, habits and preferences with the audience. It's not just about the product, but how I react to the product and explain it. I'd like to think that the influence is mostly positive – like I am a friend advising them on the best products based on my testing them out and also my expertise with fitness.

BLOGGER/SELF-CONCEPTION

What is your name?

Christine Y.

What is your occupation? Freelance consultant and writer. I work with clients primarily in the nonprofit sector but do work with some private sector clients.

When did you first develop a passion for fitness?

I've been active my whole life and grew up playing pretty much every sport under the sun – from swimming to soccer to field hockey to volleyball to lacrosse to water polo. Being part of a team and playing sports gave me a sense of confidence and camaraderie. However, it wasn't until later in life that I actually considered myself an athlete. Today, I love running, swimming, surfing, yoga, strength training, hiking, and skiing. I love anything that will take my outside and give me the opportunity to explore and discover new places, food and people.

For how long have you been doing this professionally?

I am not a fitness professional.

When did you start blogging and what was the reason for it?

I started my blog in November 2011. I originally started my blog as a way to chronicle my quest to learn to surf – from a beginner's point of view on the sport – and the challenges of balancing work, life, fitness and family with my new-found obsession with surfing. I started surfing in April 2011. After a week in Costa Rica at an amazing surf coaching resort, I was hooked. However, when I got home, I searched for websites and blogs on surfing and surf theory but I couldn't really find anything that I could relate to. Most of what I found was geared towards more experienced surfers and didn't address the basic questions or the trials and tribulations of a beginner surfer so I wanted to offer my reflections on the things that I learn every time I out in the water. But things change and life intervenes and I haven't been surfing as much as I would like and the blog has taken off in other directions to talk more about my family, running, yoga and other life adventures.

In your opinion what is the purpose of your blog?

The purpose of my blog is to share stories. I share stories about my experiences as a mom of two young boys who is trying to balance work, fitness, family and healthy living, and the lessons that I've learned through these experiences. I share the challenges I encounter, my successes and setbacks as well as how I choose to handle these situations in a real and honest way. While I might not be a professional athlete, I treasure the opportunity to share my story as a way to lift up others who are also everyday women and mothers and who are working to fit it all in while running/swimming/surfing/yogaing their hearts out.

What do you like to write about and how often do you post?

Primarily, I write about fitness and healthy living, parenting/family, and other life adventures.

- **From where do you draw the information for your blogs?** My blog posts are all based on my own personal and life experience.
- **Do you read other fitness blogs for inspiration? What interests you the most?** I do read many other fitness blogs for inspiration and information and workouts. But also, I've become "friends" with many fitness bloggers and I read their blogs to read their stories, to check in on them and what's going on in their lives and to cheer them on.

What blog posts attract the most attention from your readers and what are they most interested in?

The blog posts that attract the most attention from my readers are the one in which I am honest when honestly may be difficult, where I show my vulnerability and that I'm a real person experiencing life and going through many of the challenges that they may also be experiencing. For example, I recently wrote a post about the myth of work-life balance that seemed to resonate with my readers: <http://www.lovelifesurf.com/2013/04/work-life-balance-myth.html>.

When your readers comment on your posts how do you interact with them?

I try to respond to all comments that I receive, especially new commenters. I usually respond directly but sometimes I'll tweet someone to say thank you. I also try to visit their blogs, if they have one. I also wrote a post about this: <http://www.lovelifesurf.com/2012/10/bloggers-guilt.html>

Do you feel like you are adapting your tone of voice when talking to your readers?

I don't really change the tone of my voice when I write or talk to my readers. I try to portray my real self – the same person would shine through the words on my blog and in person.

While blogging do you feel like you play a certain role for your audience, if yes what is it?

I don't feel like I play any specific role. I'm not a fitness professional nor do I have any credentials (i.e. certified personal trainer, yoga instructor, nutritionist, etc.) so I don't think that people come looking solely for information about a certain topic. Rather, I think that they come to hear my stories and about my experiences. I think my role is really that of a storyteller and a cheerleader. I want to encourage people to live more intentionally, to try new things, to move past their comfort zone and I'm ready to be there to cheer them on in doing so.

What role would you like your audience to see you play? (e.g. influencer, content producer, expert/opinion leader, knowledge mover etc).

Same as above. I would like to be seen as a credible resource.

Are you active in other social media channels? If yes, which ones and how do they complement your blog?

Yes! Being active in social media is pretty much a requirement for blogging. I'm most active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Less so on Pinterest and Google+. All are essential and complement my blog – being known as a credential resource and "expert" in certain areas, building my image, brand and message. They also are essential in promoting my blog and my blog posts.

BRANDS

Have you been approached by brands asking to advertise your products? If yes, how often does this occur?

Yes, I have been approached by brands. On average, this happens once or twice a week.

If you decide to mention/ advertise the brand on the blog on what basis do you select brands/ advertisements to feature in your blog (fit with blog, brand, financial compensation, value to reader)?

The brand/company has to fit me and my blog and be something of interest to my readers. My first obligation is to my readers. The brand/company also has to be something that I genuinely like/already use or am interested in.

How trustworthy do you perceive product reviews or other brand related content that you publish?

I think that anything that's "sponsored" or "compensated" is read with a bit of skepticism since it is being compensated. That being said, if it is for a product or brand that I truly am passionate about, that I've talked about and raved about, that I use regularly, I think that lends more credibility to the review/content being published.

What do you think is the reaction of your readers to this kind of content?

I definitely don't get as much engagement per se on sponsored content. I think that it can be hard to write good, engaging sponsored content.

When you promote products on your blog do you think it has an influence on the way the audience perceives you? If yes, to what extent?

I think that it depends on my much and how often you promote products on your blog. I think that readers will tolerate a sponsored post from time to time but if you start posting sponsored content all the time, you're likely to lose credibility and lose readers.

Interview 5: Danica, conducted on May 10, 2013 (E-mail)

BLOGGER/SELF-CONCEPTION

What is your name?

Danica.

What is your occupation?

Social Media Manager for a Fitness Brand.

When did you first develop a passion for fitness?

In Middle School.

For how long have you been doing this professionally?

6 years.

When did you start blogging and what was the reason for it?

In July 2008! I missed writing for school and started training for my first half marathon.

In your opinion what is the purpose of your blog?

To document my training and running.

What do you like to write about and how often do you post?

I like to write about my memories I have in my life, whether it is about running or personal memories.

- **From where do you draw the information for your blogs?** From my life.
- **Do you read other fitness blogs for inspiration? What interests you the most?** I try to read blogs but honestly I don't have much time to anymore. Anything to do with social media and running are interesting to me. I also like baking blogs.

What blog posts attract the most attention from your readers and what are they most interested in?

Ones that I have struggled in. During a race when I do poorly are their favorites!

When your readers comment on your posts how do you interact with them? I read the comments and sometimes write back if they have a specific question.

Do you feel like you are adapting your tone of voice when talking to your readers?

No, my voice is exactly how I am in real life.

While blogging do you feel like you play a certain role for your audience, if yes what is it?

No, I am the same person online and offline.

What role would you like your audience to see you play?

(e.g. influencer, content producer, expert/opinion leader, knowledge mover etc). I think I would most like to be an inspiration to those reading my blog.

Are you active in other social media channels? If yes, which ones and how do they complement your blog?

I am active on twitter and facebook.

BRANDS

Have you been approached by brands asking to advertise your products? If yes, how often does this occur? Yes, about 5-7 times a week.

If you decide to mention/ advertise the brand on the blog on what basis do you select brands/ advertisements to feature in your blog (fit with blog, brand, financial compensation, value to reader)?

I make sure they are a fit and that I also like the product and that it will bring value to the readers.

How trustworthy do you perceive product reviews or other brand related content that you publish?

I only post reviews of products that I believe in. If there is something wrong with the product I will contact the company that sent it to me and let them know my concerns and that I won't be posting a review.

What do you think is the reaction of your readers to this kind of content?

I think they like it and find it useful especially if they were interested in the product.

When you promote products on your blog do you think it has an influence on the way the audience perceives you? If yes, to what extent?

Yes! I get a lot of traffic to my reviews and people have bought products I've reviewed.