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Riitta Hänninen

"Is This an Advertisement or a Personal Account?" – Commercialisation of Lifestyle Blogs in Finland

Introduction

When blogging[1] first appeared on the map of social media in the mid-1990s, the majority of bloggers were male writing for example about the developments of the online world, or if they were political reporters, looking for a new platform to publish their perhaps more controversial work. Today many blogs fall into the category of lifestyle blogs, which have thousands, sometimes even tens of thousands of individual readers per month throughout the world. In fact, professional blogging is one of the fastest growing phenomena online. It is driven mostly by relatively young women and promoted by the commercialisation of the blogging world, also known by bloggers as "the blogosphere".

During the past few years, lifestyle blogs have reached a point where one's hobby has become – if not a full-time job – then at least a relevant part of professional lifestyle bloggers' monthly income[2]. The changes Finnish lifestyle bloggers have encountered as they have moved from personal diary-like entries towards corporate models of marketing and advertising have not taken place without their difficulties. Some blog readers criticise lifestyle blogs for becoming inauthentic market places without real content or integrity. There are also problems with the legislation that governs advertising in the blogosphere. The regulations have proven vague or difficult to carry out in social media, forcing professional lifestyle bloggers to defend their new trade not only against some of their readers but also in the eyes of the law.

In this article I examine the contradictions between bloggers and advertising: *why is it that while many bloggers promote an open relationship towards advertising in their blogs, they do not fully appreciate the existence of some of the regulations or guidelines that control advertising in their blogs?* I am interested especially in the intimate relationship bloggers have developed with their readers, which has been greatly underplayed in the previous studies on lifestyle blogging, as well as with the commercial world of marketing in the context of advertising. My ethnographic description also adds to the understanding of the commercial aspects of lifestyle blogging and of the professionalisation of the blogosphere. The research data include the blog posts of 20 professional lifestyle bloggers as well as an ethnographic description of the Finnish blogosphere online. The research materials are analysed by using contextualised thematic analysis.

There are three sets of interpretative frames emerging from the research materials that give form to the basic structure of this analysis. In the first analytical chapter, I discuss the close affinity between lifestyle blogs and other lifestyle media, such as magazines, and lifestyle industry in general, which proposes itself as a point of comparison for bloggers when they describe their attitudes towards advertising and surreptitious advertising. The second interpretative frame reflects the complex relationship bloggers have with their readers. As will be established later in more detail, it is often the blog readers that act as "the instigators of the law" when they observe how advertising is conducted in a given lifestyle

blog. The third chapter of analysis discussed in this article could be best titled as the autonomy or self-sufficiency of bloggers. As an interpretative frame, "autonomy" reflects the "expressive project" lifestyle blogs provide for many bloggers.

The face of blogging from the early 1990s until today

Blogs are typically published by individuals, and their style is personal and informal. They first appeared in social media in the mid-1990s, offering simple and free publishing tools for anybody interested in sharing their thoughts and life in the blogosphere. (Rettberg 2008.) There are several apparent genres available in the blogging world ranging from politically oriented "A-list" blogs written mainly by young adult males (Herring et al. 2005; Liu 2014, 32) to celebrity blogs. There are also categories such as food, fashion and travel included in the world of blogging, accompanied with the popular genre of lifestyle blogs run today especially by women.

Blogging became a topic of public debate and research ever since its first appearance with platforms such as Blogger.com and Blogspot.com at the end of the 1990s (Chittenden 2010, 505; Lövheim 2011a; Rocamora 2011, 408; Turtiainen 2009, 224). It was not, however, until the mid-2000s that lifestyle blogging made its final breakthrough online. In 2004 for example the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2004; cf. Makato Su et al. 2005) declared "blog" as the "number one" word of the year. According to Nielsen (2012; Technorati 2011; cf. Colucci & Cho 2014), there were 181 million blogs worldwide in 2010, which is sixty times more than in 2007. Studies also indicate that almost half of all blogs are created by teenagers or relatively young people (Huffaker & Calvert 2005; Hodkinson & Lincoln 2008, 28).

In Finland, lifestyle blogs were first introduced to social media in the mid-2000s[3], after which the category has grown rapidly and established itself as a popular genre in the local blogosphere. Unfortunately there are no statistics available that would confirm or refute this argument based on my observations online. During my research, however, there were no indications that the development in Finland would differ from the overall expansion of the blogosphere worldwide. Additionally, from a commercial point of view, the relevance of advertising has also grown steadily over the past few years. According to the Finnish advertising agency Manifesto's[4] annual barometer, 76 percent of bloggers had been contacted by advertisers in 2014 and 90 percent in 2015.

The concept of a lifestyle blog is a notoriously broad term describing various aspects of "good living". While gathering the research material, I discovered that bloggers often find it difficult to pinpoint their exact status in the blogosphere. Many of them do not regard defining their blogs or placing them under a specific title such as "lifestyle blogs" very important or even possible. They simply write about things they encounter on a daily basis. As Rocamora (2011, 409) argues, lifestyle blogs include a broad range of genres such as street fashion, celebrities or a focus on a particular type of commodity (shoes, bags, cooking, decorating). The main focus of lifestyle blogs is, however, on the blogger's own persona with her individual ideas, thoughts and even the most mundane incidents of everyday life.

From a commercial point of view, lifestyle blogs focus on consumption by displaying a series of products assembled using different forms of advertising (e.g. product demonstration). They project an image of wealth and leisure through a wide range of aesthetic tools such as high-quality photographs, backgrounds, images and occasional embedded videos. (Sinanan et al. 2014, 202, 209.) Lifestyle blogs also communicate new up-and-coming products and trends to readers and thus turn them from blogs readers into avid consumers.

Previous studies

Studies on the rise of marketing in lifestyle blogs are relatively few considering the fact that commercialisation marks one of the biggest changes in the blogosphere both in Finland and worldwide. While much research has focused on the effects of media use and content of the blogo-

sphere in general, the commercialisation and professionalisation of the world of blogging have often been underplayed in academic research (cf. Wasko 2008). In this article I argue that it is necessary to grasp this process more completely to be able to fully understand the complexities behind the commercialisation of lifestyle blogging.

Recent studies show that most blogs can be found in the category of personal blogs. The majority of these blogs seem to be written by relatively young people, especially young women. (Herring et al. 2004; Lenhart & Fox 2006; Findahl 2009; Lövheim 2011b, 4.) Internationally research has focused on blogs that have clear journalistic or political aspirations (Noppari & Hautakangas 2012; Rocamora 2011; cf. Bruns 2005; cf. Carlson 2007; cf. Domingo & Heinonen 2008). In the context of commercialisation, lifestyle blogs have been mostly studied as part of quantitative consumer research. In fact, there is only a handful of research that treats lifestyle blogging qualitatively or from an ethnographic stand point (Hänninen & Kotonen 2015; Autio 2011; cf. Noppari & Hautakangas 2012, 15; Lövheim 2011b; Bortree 2005; cf. Östman 2015).

Lövheim (2011b) has studied young Swedish fashion and lifestyle bloggers in the context of individualised and commercialised femininity, including autonomy, self-development and career. Susan Herring et al. (2005, 163) are interested in knowing how blogs are being increasingly used for commercial purposes, and how this might threaten the degree of spontaneity, trust and intimate content of lifestyle blogs. Lövheim's analysis indicates that rather than decreasing this kind of content, young female top bloggers emphasise intimacy, trust and spontaneity in their postings and contacts with readers. Bloggers' use of this strategy as a way of maintaining a connection with their readers corresponds to the way commercial actors have increased their interest in personal blogs (Lövheim 2011b, 14; Rettberg 2008, 127.) One could even say that the close relationship between bloggers and their readers is the main reason the commercialisation of the blogosphere is happening in the first place.

This strategy may further the integration of interpersonal and commercial aspects of blogging. On the other hand, the professionalisation of young female bloggers – i.e. a situation where their popularity enables them to more or less make their living in the blogosphere – introduces a new possibility for bloggers to become active subjects of their everyday lives. The integration of popular, professional, commercial and personal aspects of blogging can thus be seen as their attempt to regain their active agency as members of late-modern Western society. (Lövheim 2011b, 14.)

The prime characteristic of personal blogs is their focus on the personal and the intimate. This also implies that the criteria of personal selection and presentation of information, and non-fictional or "true" content are highly significant in the commercialisation of lifestyle blogging (Miller & Shepherd 2004; Rettberg 2008; Lüders 2007; Lövheim 2011a; Bortree 2005). The practices of personal, diary-like lifestyle blogging have become increasingly intertwined with professional media production and marketing as popular bloggers are offered a variety of opportunities for collaboration with the media and the business world. Many lifestyle blogs attract interactive audiences of remarkable size. They also balance between traditional dualisms such as the concepts of social media and traditional media publicity, a hobby and a profession as well as the private and the public (Noppari & Hautakangas 2012, 8), which will also be discussed later on in this article.

Legislation in Finnish lifestyle blogging

The majority of Finnish lifestyle bloggers analysed in this article find the legislation that governs advertising in the blogosphere a positive thing and endorse it. All the major blog portals in Finland, including for example Indiedays, also have special "ethical codes" to guide their bloggers in the context of responsible advertising. Anna, who has been blogging for seven years, describes surreptitious advertising as a form of deceit towards blog readers:

> Some bloggers advertise judiciously and with skill. Others do it blatantly. There are also bloggers who

> do it secretly. Some bloggers don't advertise at all. The situation gets emotional, because blogs don't represent traditional media with their customary advertising. […] A person that has become a victim of surreptitious advertising thus feels cheated, diddled and ripped off. She has been fool enough to listen to the blogger's opinion, which in reality has proven to be surreptitious advertising.[5]

Surreptitious advertising today poses a real problem in the blogosphere – a problem that affects not only the bloggers that endorse it, but also those who are against it, including many blog readers. In this context, legislation provides much-welcomed guidelines and clarity to the blogosphere where the commercialisation of lifestyle blogging proceeds rapidly, thus often leaving the average blogger confused with the "dos and don'ts" of the trade.

According to the Finnish Competition and Consumer Authority (FCCA), "companies advertising through blogs need to make sure that readers can distinguish advertisements from other content". Many companies use blogs as marketing channels by making cooperation agreements with bloggers or by sending them products as gifts or "giveaways". The aim is that the blogger will promote the sales of the product or service by recommending it in her blog. On the other hand, bloggers can also actively acquire advertisements for their blogs and earn money with them. (GCM 2013.)[6]

The focus of the FCCA lies in the Consumer Protection Act (CPA), which provides guidelines on the recognisability of advertising and thus renders it clear that all surreptitious advertising is to be taken seriously whether in blogs or in any other medium applicable to marketing. The legislation endorsed by the FCCA is in accordance with for example the Swedish Consumer Agency (SCA) guidelines, which also emphasises the transparency of advertising online[7]. Both the Finnish and Swedish legislation bestow a relatively low level of responsibility on bloggers in the context of advertising especially in comparison with the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC). In the United States, it is required that bloggers give a full public account of the fees they receive against paid advertisements. Bloggers are also held personally accountable for any damage induced by misleading marketing[8].

According to Chapter 1, Section 1 of the CPA (GCP 2013), "the legislation applies to the availability, sale, and other marketing of consumer goods, by businesses to consumers. The law is also applied when the trader passes on goods to consumers." The CPA's Chapter 2, Section 4 is also very unambiguous on the fact that "marketing shall clearly indicate its commercial purpose and the party on whose behalf the marketing is carried out". It is thus important to clearly state if material that seems independent is in fact commercially sponsored, and reveal the sponsor in question. (Ibid.)

Despite the many benefits of the CPA outlining the basic guidelines of advertising in blogs, there are also loopholes in the legislation, which leaves many bloggers less than satisfied with the new regulations. Firstly, the guidelines derived from the CPA by the FCCA apply only to professional actors in the field of marketing. It recognises that a blogger can write a blog only as a hobby and that in such cases "the activity cannot be evaluated on the basis of the CPA, but in spite of this, the blogger would do well to take the rules on the recognisability of advertising into consideration, because the readers cannot otherwise avoid hidden advertising." (Ibid.)

What the CPA basically suggests is that there are two kinds of bloggers writing in the blogosphere – professional and amateur bloggers – and that although the regulations of the CPA apply only to professional bloggers, they come recommended also to the amateur bloggers who blog only as a hobby. The obvious problem raised by the legislation is how to define the fine line between professional and amateur bloggers in a situation where the majority of professional bloggers write their blogs only part time while for example studying or maintaining their day jobs at the same time. It is thus difficult to define who exactly is a professional blogger and whether one should follow the legislation even if one does not qualify as a professional blogger whatever that might entail.

The second point of confusion that I will discuss later in detail is based on Chapter 2, Section

4 of the CPA and is related to the specific ways advertising should be made visible to readers. It also provides an exception to the guidelines as the regulations do not apply to cases where an advertisement is clearly recognisable as a commercial communication such as for example banners that are popular in many lifestyle blogs.

Research material and methodology

The research method employed in this study is online ethnography, including blog posts and long-term observation of blogs, similar to traditional ethnographic observation (Hine 2015). According to Tom Boellstorff (2008), ethnography is exceptionally well-equipped to deal with "the virtual" of the online world, because in a sense almost everything within the human realm, including e. g. norms, values and cultural patterns in general, is by definition virtual. Despite the obvious differences between "the virtual" and "the real", there is thus a special kind of abstract quality shared by these two worlds that is revealed through ethnographic description whether it is conducted inside or outside the online world.

Instead of focusing only on the discussion regarding advertising or surreptitious advertising, I have also been examining what bloggers actually write and do in their daily blog posts that often have nothing explicit to say about the commercialisation of the blogosphere in practice. In comparison with e.g. textual analysis, which often regards research material as individual texts, online ethnography also makes it possible for the researcher to place the blog posts into broader interpretative contexts and thus take into account the idiosyncrasies of the Finnish blogosphere.

As McCullagh (2008, 3; cf. Viégas 2006) points out, the difference between blogs and other publishing sites in the Internet, such as home pages, is that rather than substituting new materials for old ones, bloggers simply add new posts, creating a growing compilation of entries as well as an archive of previous posts. By "following" these blog posts on a regular basis, it is thus possible to establish an overview of the personality and style of an individual blogger. Applying this information as an interpretative context gives methodological prowess to the analysis in the form of e.g. source criticism. In this study I have followed most of the 20 blogs under analysis for as long as they have existed or there are archives available[9].

Finding blogs in the Internet is easy, but coming up with blogs posts that are significant to a specific research question and sampling them may prove difficult, especially if the researcher is not familiar with the blogosphere. As Hookway (2010, 98) describes, borrowing the words of O'Neill (2005, 7), the blogosphere can be "unwieldy and unmanageable" as it consists of "infinite multiplication of voices". In this article I have applied traditional ethnographic snowball sampling (cf. O'Reilly 2012) to the online world of blogging, and followed individual posts that discuss advertising and surreptitious advertising to other blog posts. Sometimes it has been easy to follow the discussion through links established by the bloggers themselves or to crosscheck the names of fellow bloggers mentioned in a particular post on advertising. Additionally, I have found clues in the comment boxes of some the blogs posts that have proven useful. As I have been reading Finnish lifestyle blogs as a personal pastime of mine for seven years now, I have developed an overview of the local blogosphere, which has helped me to find a sufficient number of "key posts" that form the basis of the actual thematic analysis of blog posts. I have also build up a great amount of contextual knowledge as I have observed the Finnish blogosphere first as an average reader and more recently as an ethnographer.

The blog posts were gathered between April and May 2015. They consist of twenty Finnish lifestyle bloggers' posts commenting on the changing relationships between lifestyle blogging and its commercialisation. The overall number of blogs analysed for this article is 20, which equals a total of 120 pages of research material excluding visual data such as photographs and occasional embedded videos, although on a contextual level they too are part of the analysis[10]. All the blog posts are written by women who have been blogging for five years or more – some of them even from the start of lifestyle blogging in Finland in the mid-2000s – and their age ranges between

25 and 45. The research material mainly focuses on professional lifestyle bloggers as they have a closer relationship with advertising in the blogosphere compared to those who blog only as their hobby and have little or no contact with the commercial side of the blogosphere.

The blog posts have been written in 2008–2015 and reflect the profound change marked by the commercialisation the Finnish lifestyle blogging scene has encountered in this relatively short period of time. The research data shed light particularly on the overall impact advertising has had on blogging since the beginning of the decade or so, which marks a turning point in lifestyle blogging in Finland. The majority of the blog post were written in 2013, when the Finnish Direct Marketing Association (Finnish DMA) was planning a set of guidelines that would regulate advertising and especially surreptitious advertising in Finnish blogs[11]. As the FCCA was already regulating online marketing in more detail at the time, the scheduled guidelines drafted by the Finnish DMA were never fully developed. Nevertheless, the Finnish DMA's draft created a lot of criticism among lifestyle bloggers on how commercial collaboration should be represented in the blogosphere as a whole. In general, however, advertising has been a regular topic of discussion in Finnish lifestyle blogs for a decade now especially among bloggers and their readers.

The research material has been analysed by using contextual thematic analysis. As the research material on the commercialisation of Finnish lifestyle blogs is exceedingly varied in the blogosphere, I found it important to create a focus that could best represent the blogger's point of view in the blogosphere. I also wanted to avoid some of the reductive problems related to the traditional opposition between the diary-like non-commercial and commercial aspects of lifestyle blogging, which does not fully appreciate the complexities of the Finnish blogosphere.

Based on my earlier observations as a blog reader, I had noticed that there is a strong ambivalence at play among lifestyle bloggers regarding advertising in the blogosphere. I was especially intrigued by the fact that there were so many bloggers that were absolutely against surreptitious advertising while at the same time they did not very much appreciate many of the ethical guidelines designed to guide advertising in blogs. During the process of thematic analysis, where I asked why the ethical guidelines are so problematic to lifestyle bloggers, I encountered three separate although intertwined frames of interpretation that are further developed in the analytical chapters. The frames range from personal accounts that discuss the similarity of lifestyle blogs with traditional women's magazines to the relationship between bloggers and their readers and finally to bloggers' individual artistic aspirations in the context of their blogs. Contextualising this thematic analysis and thus turning it from a thematic analysis into a contextual thematic analysis by combining the blog posts with observation forms an integral part of the ethnographic description in this article.

Blog posts are public documents that can be read by anyone in the Internet. It is not, however, as straightforward as that to use blog posts as research material without consulting the individual bloggers about it. In the light of research ethics, it would be problematic to disregard the implications that the changing contexts – from a blog post intended for blog readers into a piece of research data – have on the blog posts, or to assume that this transition would be automatically accepted by the bloggers. In this research, the bloggers appearing in the analysis have been informed about the academic use of their blog posts. Additionally, they have had the opportunity to decline their participation in the research. I have also erased the names of the bloggers, blogs and blog posts in order to protect the anonymity of the bloggers. All names appearing in this article are pseudonyms (cf. AoIR 2012; Östman 2015).

The issue of equality and fair play – the affinity between lifestyle blogs and women's magazines

Observing the Finnish blogosphere, it has become clear to me that advertising is an integral part of contemporary lifestyle blogs. Still, one cannot say that there has always been advertising in Finnish

lifestyle blogs as there was a moment in the history of lifestyle blogging in the mid-2000s, also known in the blogosphere as the "Golden Age"[12], when this was not the case. Bloggers often describe their everyday lives and things that they like or find useful in their blogs (cf. Sinanan et al 2014). They also frequently write down to their readers the brand of the lipstick or the piece of cheese they have tried out as they know their readers might be interested in this kind of information often discussed lively for example in the comment box of a given blog post.

The basic structure and logic of lifestyle blogs has spontaneously developed over the years, and could be best described in advertising terms as peer marketing (cf. Puska 2014, 54). Bloggers serve as friends or acquaintances, thus providing an easy and reliable point of identification or even admiration for readers who share a similar life situation or sense of taste and style. Some of the products or services depicted in lifestyle blogs are purchases that bloggers have paid for themselves, whereas others are sponsored by various brands and companies.

Despite their obvious differences, traditional women's magazines and lifestyle blogs also share many similarities, including the presence of advertisements. There are also a number of other groups of people such as athletes and celebrities that advertise products and, according to some of the bloggers I analysed for my research, "seem to get away with it". One of the main reasons bloggers criticise the legislation that governs advertising and especially surreptitious adverting is that they feel it does not treat them equally in comparison with journalists of the magazine industry. As Ada, 34, who has been blogging for ten years, describes:

> [...] I am sitting in a row [at a press conference] with a reporter, drinking bad coffee. The reporter gets paid, but I don't. We both write a deep, critical story about the company and the subject matter. The reporter doesn't have to come forward about this "collaboration", whereas I end my blog post by writing "in collaboration with company X".

The difference here between magazines and lifestyle blogs stems from the fact that women's magazines are indeed an older and thus more established phenomenon compared to lifestyle blogs. As the popularity of life style blogs has grown over the past few years, also the number of advertisements in blogs has increased exponentially. The magazine industry has a notorious reputation of behaving indifferently towards the CPA, and some bloggers suspect that it pursues surreptitious advertising despite it being against the law.

According to Veronica, who has blogged for several years now, "at their worst, they [blogs] are completely uncontrolled and shameless market places. This can be partly due to the ignorance and inexperience of the bloggers, so it is good that this is discussed openly in the media." The reasons why surreptitious marketing is considered to take place in lifestyle blogs vary. Firstly, bloggers are a very heterogeneous group consisting of both professional and amateur bloggers from all walks of life. The threshold to start a blog is very low, which means that not all people are equally aware of the legislation concerning advertising in blogs. There are also misunderstandings that may occur, as Anna describes in her account:

> Several weeks ago I received a big envelope. It contained 4 packages of sweets and an advertising letter. It said that because they consider me a significant fashion blogger, they wanted to send me some of their newest products. I thought "hey, kewl" and ate everything. And now, when I read Karen's [a fellow blogger discussing the fact that the sweets have been sent to the bloggers in the hope that they will be mentioned in the blog] post, I finally realise the true meaning of those sweets.

From a second point of view, the marketing industry does not always support the good intentions of bloggers. In fact, there are cases where companies have tried to conceal their actual presence in blogs. Jessie, 35, who has been blogging for five years, has personal experience of declining an offer made by a big international brand due to ethical issues:

> Because of search engine optimisation, the phrases used in the collaboration were to be carefully limited

> and (there were certain words [such as "advert"][13] that were not supposed to be used in the post, the collaboration was to be presented only as a logo instead of text and so on).

The brand that sought to collaborate with Jessie requested that she would not use the term "advertisement" in her blog. They also insisted that the actual name of the brand would be presented only as a logo, which would have meant that any of the existing search engines in the Internet could not have recognised the blog post as an advertisement although it would have otherwise fallen into that category. Not all requests regarding advertising are, however, as tactful as the one described above. As Jessie notes in her comments on the previous example: "their offer was not by any means the worst I've received. Some companies have been even more audacious, saying that please write about us, but don't mention that this is an advert."

Businesses seek out opportunities to exploit advertising in lifestyle blogs, because it is at the same time effective and relatively inexpensive. All marketing in lifestyle blogs and blogs in general relies on one already established factor – namely trust (cf. Chai & Kim 2010; cf. Colucci & Cho 2014). Established lifestyle bloggers in Finland have been around several years writing about their dreams, families and everyday lives on the whole. There are also readers who follow their favourite blogs regularly on a daily basis. Thus, positive recommendations coming from these bloggers already familiar to the readers are often considered interesting, enjoyable and trustworthy. Small companies that have not yet created a strong brand benefit from borrowing the good reputation of a lifestyle blogger in order to gain visibility. Big international brands, in turn, seek out specialised niches to market their products in the blogosphere, where advertising costs are still considerably lower than in the advertising branch in general (cf. Boyd 2008, 136). They too rely on the brands and trust established by lifestyle bloggers.

According to my observations, there are several ways for bloggers to benefit from their blogs, including free samples, gift cards, sponsored events and trips, lotteries, paid reviews and discounts, which can also be offered to the readers. Sponsored advertisements are based on the idea of product placement in blogs. The nature of sponsored advertisements varies depending on e.g. whether the blogger receives a writer's fee in exchange for her work or whether she herself has requested a specific product to be sent to her. Affiliate links give bloggers an opportunity to receive a commission depending on the number of "clicks" or items purchased by blog readers via the links[14]. Some bloggers also receive regular writer's fees from blog portals they work for or act as a partner for an independent blog community.

Even though the vast majority of bloggers are against surreptitious advertising, it is known to happen that sometimes bloggers consciously keep silent about the fact that there is an advertisement present in their blog post and that they have received a monetary compensation from a company. Stephanie, 25, who has been blogging for five years, points out that this is common especially in the category of sponsored links:

> They [sponsored links] are worked into a blog post and it is only in the comment box where it is usually revealed that there is a bag of coins to be found behind the post. Quite often the writer implies that she has just randomly ended up discussing a certain topic, places links in her blog post that lead to unfamiliar websites and sort of forgets to tell the readers that she has received money in exchange for her blog post.

As has already been established, lifestyle bloggers as well as bloggers in general are a heterogeneous group. They come in all ages from teenagers to young adults, and for many writers blogging is a hobby, which means that they are not in fact bound by the CPA. It is also important to notice that there is only a small although growing number of professional bloggers in Finland in the sense that their income is based solely on blogging. The majority of Finnish lifestyle bloggers are amateur or semi-professional bloggers with little experience regarding the commercial aspects of the blogosphere. According to Stephanie, some of these bloggers find themselves struggling with

surreptitious advertising, because there is money involved they need in order to survive:

> Everybody can [...] contemplate on a situation where a business partner offers you 500 euros in exchange for a blog post containing surreptitious advertising. How deep does the idealism of a student or a person with low income run when there is a pile of free money on the table? Would you take it or leave it? I admit that on my scale this kind of money is so big that it might pose an option for me.

The enchantment of money or other rewards such as product gifts or discounts is strongly reflected in lifestyle blogs especially if one is not properly informed about the legal aspects of advertising in the blogosphere, as sometimes happens. There are also cases where the ethical choice made by an individual blogger is motivated by money. The CPA does not, however, take into account why somebody makes certain ethical choices. It merely states that surreptitious advertising is against the law.

Blog readers as advocates of open marketing in lifestyle blogs

An ethnographic description of the Finnish blogosphere gives an interesting overview of the complex relationship between lifestyle bloggers and their readers. Many bloggers describe readers writing their thoughts in the comment boxes as a positive thing. Interaction with the readers is something that is highly valued, and is often considered one of the major reasons a blogger is writing her blog in the first place (cf. Chittenden 2010; cf. Lövheim 2013)[15]. Additionally, it is part of the blogging etiquette that the blogger replies to the comments she receives, thus creating an atmosphere of sociality in her blog. There is also interaction between individual readers in lifestyle blogs as they engage in conversations and sometimes even debates.

As the process of commercialisation proceeds in the Finnish blogosphere, certain problems have arisen that challenge the positive relationship between lifestyle bloggers and their blog readers. Rude and unpleasant comments have to a certain extent always been part of lifestyle blogging, emphasising the fact that in an anonymous crowd, such as the comment box of a lifestyle blog or in social media in general, there are those who have something negative to share with others. Some comment boxes are moderated by bloggers, which means that the blogger has to approve the incoming comments before they are published. She also has the power to discard readers' comments or leave them unpublished. Not all bloggers find it necessary to restrict commenting in their blogs, but there are those, usually professional bloggers, who have to resort to this in order to maintain peace in their blogs.

According to my observations, the negative comments in lifestyle blogs deal with various topics ranging from the personality and physical appearance of the blogger to her choices in home decoration, child rearing, writing skills and finally, as it often happens, the advertising displayed in the blog. Although not all blog readers protest against advertising in blogs on the whole, there are a number of readers who do not condone it at all. According to this line of thinking, all advertising is surreptitious advertising and should be banned from the blogosphere. As Emma, 30, who has been blogging for six years, explains, she cannot in fact remember a time when this "war" as she calls it against surreptitious advertising in lifestyle blogs was not in progress:

> "*Surreptitious advertising*" is a recurrent topic in the blogosphere that resurfaces in discussion every few months. Bloggers are required to give a comprehensive account of the origins of the products [they are writing about in their blogs], and when things go really bad, any reference to a product in a blog is discredited as a piece of surreptitious advertising. In the comment boxes bloggers are harassed to confess whether a certain product was received as a giveaway or if it has been bought *honestly* using the blogger's own money.[16]

One of the main reasons lifestyle bloggers find it offensive to be restricted by whom they consider outsiders to their trade, such as certain parties

drawing instructions on how to properly handle advertising in lifestyle blogs, is the fact that they are already being policed by their readers. As Pauline, 31, who has been blogging for nine years, points out: "the little police officers searching for surreptitious advertising in my blog will come up empty-handed as I've certainly made it very clear whether the source of my inspiration is writing a post in exchange for an advertiser making my wallet burst."

The false accusations regarding bloggers' integrity and honesty are described as offensive by lifestyle bloggers. Furthermore, they create extra work for bloggers as they have to answer questions regarding surreptitious advertising and monitor their email accounts and comment boxes in case of complaints. On the other hand, it is obvious that the reviews bloggers write on some items they like and buy themselves with their own money often become confused with the commercial giveaways they promote in their blogs due to the similarity in form and expression. It is also true that the surreptitious advertising that occurs in the Finnish blogosphere has created an atmosphere of mistrust among certain blog readers towards advertising in lifestyle blogs on the whole.

Another reason bloggers find the "policing" by their readers intrusive is because it enters into their private lives, disrupting the boundaries they have themselves established in order to protect themselves. As Abidin (2013; cf. Abidin & Thompson 2012) points out in the context of the Singaporean blogosphere, the personas created by lifestyle bloggers for their blogs and their business are distinct from their real identities. They are thus consciously using their privacy as a commodity by sharing a certain portion of their private lives in order to advance their careers. The boundaries between the private and the official vary from blog to blog according to the preferences of individual bloggers, and can be confusing for some of the more inquisitive blog readers. In addition to bloggers' own observations, I too have come across with instances in online forums where a group of blog readers have engaged in a conversation about, for example, the domestic issues or finances of a lifestyle blogger. Such contemplations have been mainly based on the information the blogger writes about her everyday life, but sometimes also on other sources such as former friends, acquaintances or plain rumours. According to Emma, one of the most common types of intrusion into a professional blogger's life is the speculation upon the sources and size of her income:

> The most unbelievable thing I think is that it is okay to ask, for example, about our monthly income even in interviews [for a magazine] (not to mention of course in the comment box). At what point does the person insisting on knowing our salaries forget good manners and ethics? I wouldn't dream of asking even my closest friends about their income, let alone demanding a comprehensive report on the other benefits they receive through their jobs.

Bloggers are frequently questioned about the amount of money they make through their blogs, but also whether they have informed the tax office of all the benefits they have received from advertisers, which are also worth money and thus taxable income. As bloggers' profile as celebrities has risen during the past few years, people have also started to follow their yearly income through tabloids that regularly publish the tax records of "Who Is Who" in Finland. This also adds to the anxiety experienced by bloggers, who often regard themselves as just ordinary people. It also has to be recognised that the official tax records frequently lead one astray as they portray only the overall yearly income of a given person and do not specify any of the actual sources of that income, which can range from the person's regular or part-time jobs to the blogs they write and beyond.

In addition to the privacy issues bloggers have regarding advertising in the blogosphere, there are some technical reasons why bloggers are not necessarily enthusiastic about the new regulations concerning advertising and especially the question how it should be best conducted and made open in blogs. It is thus not advertising as such that poses the problem, but the fact that some of the suggested practices would make it more unpleasant for readers to navigate in the

blogosphere. For bloggers, one of the most difficult aspects of the guidelines is the idea that they should add the tag "commercial" to the beginning of every post. According to some bloggers, this would be inconvenient for both bloggers and readers as the indexing and thus finding a particular theme or topic in the blogosphere would become impossible due to the recurrent term "commercial" at the beginning of every blog post[17].

As lifestyle blogging has gradually become more professional through the process of commercialisation in Finland, it has become a significant source of income for bloggers. In fact, there are bloggers in Finland who actually live on their blogs and consider them their main job, which would not exist without the money from commercial companies. This is why some professional bloggers find it difficult to accept the fact that some readers think all advertising, which serves as the basis of professional blogging, is by definition surreptitious advertising. Despite the opposition between bloggers and their readers, there is also a common ground to be found between these two parties in blogs, as Stephanie describes her changing attitude:

> I've recently sort of started to understand readers in the sense that they are upset about advertising in blogs. I identify myself with them as I've noticed to my regret that there is surreptitious advertising going on in some of the relatively popular blogs that the readers are probably completely unaware of. I used to believe that we'd have finally gotten to the point where advertising would be conducted in an open manner and that everybody would agree with that, but I was wrong.

Many blog readers regularly criticise advertising in blogs, because it clutters the blogs by forcing bloggers to write about something other than their everyday life. As Stephanie points out, surreptitious advertisements are damaging to the credibility and trust established between bloggers and their readers. To a certain extent, the process of commercialisation has thus compromised the very trust companies seek out to benefit from in the blogosphere.

Lifestyle bloggers as independent authors of their blogs

According to my ethnographic observation, being an independent, hard-working entrepreneur is one of the core ideals of the blogosphere in Finland. The image of independence is further enhanced by the fact that many professional bloggers have been running their blogs for several years before the emergence of large-scale commercialisation in the blogosphere. It is also important to notice that in professional blogging a blog is never just "a job", but rather a highly personified individual project portraying the aesthetic aspirations of an individual blogger. This is apparent also with lifestyle bloggers, who often incorporate their whole lives into this "expressive project" of theirs accompanied with other forms of social media, including Facebook, Instragram, Pinterest, Twitter and most recently Snapchat.

Similarly to other forms of social media, lifestyle blogging is a relatively recent phenomenon, rendering it occasionally difficult for various officials to oversee and control the marketing in a manner that would be sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of this new trade. One of the major reasons bloggers find several of the guidelines constraining their working environment problematic is because they are unclear and complicated in the everyday use of the average blogger. As Ada points out, it is not only the various platforms in the blogosphere that differ from one another. There are also the people behind the blogs – namely the bloggers themselves – that do not fit into the unequivocal categories defined by the guidelines:

> This German regime may prove itself functional in an organisation with engineers, or if one is lucky, in a traditional media house. I doubt, however, that it could work in the blogosphere, where the crowd is really heterogeneous and where the majority of writers blog as a hobby and thus represent private individuals.

"The German regime" described here by Ada is regarded by many bloggers as a rigid and therefore dysfunctional standpoint meant for those who want to manage social media phenomena

such as lifestyle blogging in what Ada considers "the old-fashioned way" deriving from "traditional media houses" such as magazines. The main idea of the new guidelines is, in Ada's words, that "one can see at a glance if there is any commercial substance in the blog post or blog [...]", which is also required by the CPA. The problem is, however, that if such clauses were to be inserted into the text both at the very beginning and at the end of every blog post, it might distort the indexes that list the new incoming posts in the blogosphere. In this scenario, all new blog posts would thus be titled repetitiously by the commercial collaborator and not by the actual title of an individual blog post, making it difficult for readers to actively follow their favourite blogs.

From a financial as well as an aesthetic point of view, bloggers consider this a negative development that compromises their position as independent authors of their blogs. They worry, for example, whether this kind of arrangement would be visually appealing for readers, and express their concern over the "literary freedom" of the blogger as a part of their authorship. Pauline, for example, sees "no reason to underestimate blogs readers and their media skills [...] and ruin their reading experience by an excess of information stating the terms of a given collaboration".

Similar problems also arise with other forms of social media actively used by bloggers in connection with their blogs. Bloggers for example publish pictures of themselves on Facebook and Instagram doing their everyday chores, but portraying e. g. a piece of clothing or tableware they have received as a giveaway from a company. According to the CPA, these accounts can also be seen as advertising and should be marked accordingly.

It is apparent that advertising is so deeply embedded in the everyday lives of professional bloggers that it would be impossible to separate them entirely. In fact, it is commonly agreed by the bloggers I have studied that products that are advertised in a blog should reflect the taste and style of the individual blogger endorsing them, and that bloggers should be honest in their recommendations in the sense that they only write about products "they believe in". According to Jessie, "[...] the best and most credible way to advertise is to make sure that the item that is endorsed represents the blogger well and can thus be seen in the blog later on on a regular basis."

On the other hand, there are also many bloggers who find the blogging guidelines a positive and welcome help to their daily routines. As Hannah, who has been blogging for five years, points out, clear and mutually agreed clauses at the beginning and end of blog posts would in fact give bloggers more freedom and enhance the quality of (commercial) blog posts: "There would be no need any more to be evasive or dabble with euphemisms or drivel like 'this is a loan that does not have to be redeemed' in the text itself as the necessary information would already have been dealt with in a separate section reserved especially for the purpose."

The much debated guidelines drafted by the FCCA, traditional media houses and other commercial agents pose a problem to some professional lifestyle bloggers, because they have been developed without consulting bloggers themselves. Bloggers are especially worried about what kind of changes will be implemented in their everyday lives and what the environment will be like for them to continue their blogging in affiliation with advertisers. According to Ada, another drawback is that there are no independent bloggers outside blog portals or other commercial platforms involved in the development of the guidelines:

> [...] There are also Aller/Lily and Indiedays [blog portals in Finland] that have participated in drafting the new guidelines, which is a good thing. There is, however, nobody involved in the process that could speak on behalf of independent bloggers [...] I think bloggers would have been the right gatekeepers for the job.

Constructing new regulations without consulting independent bloggers is in many ways problematic. Borrowing the words of Ada, bloggers are the gatekeepers of the world of blogging in the sense that they are the ones who have originally created the blogosphere. They possess intimate knowledge of the practises and problems in the blogosphere that have not been addressed in the context of professional lifestyle blogging.

Conclusions

Lifestyle blogging is a relatively new phenomenon in social media and online marketing. In Finland, the process of commercialisation started less than ten years ago. If one looks at e.g. Sweden, which is one of the countries that has traditionally led the way in the world of blogging, it is clear that commercialisation has not yet reached its peak in Finland. In this light, more ethnographic work needs to be conducted in order to map the underlying processes associated with the commercial aspects lifestyle blogging *per se*, but also other cultural phenomena originating outside the commercial world. The relevance of ethnography is important here as it is one of the few methods of research equipped to deal with the overlapping complexities of the blogosphere in both online and more traditional offline environments.

The changes commercialisation has introduced to the Finnish blogosphere in the form of peer marketing and online advertising are profound. Bloggers are no longer alone in writing about their everyday lives to their friends, relatives or each other, as was often the case in the early days of the Finnish blogosphere in the mid-2000s. In addition to the growing number of readers bloggers have to take into account, there is also the legislation that regulates contemporary lifestyle blogs.

There are several reasons why lifestyle bloggers regard the existing guidelines that control advertising in blogs as problematic, while at the same time they endorse openness as an important ethical starting point in advertising. Firstly, lifestyle bloggers feel that the advertising guidelines and legislation allow them to be scrutinised and controlled in a way that does not apply to for example traditional women's magazines. There is thus a sense of injustice at play here that is further enhanced by the fact that lifestyle blogging is a relatively new trade unfamiliar to legislators.

Secondly, there are a lot of blog readers who not only enjoy advertising in blogs but in fact expect it and are excited to know about new products. However, the critics of advertising can at times be quite harsh about the commercial elements in lifestyle blogs, and some of them categorise all advertising as suspicious and potentially surreptitious advertising. There are also blog readers who do not appreciate bloggers' privacy and wish to know everything about the writers, including the financial details of various commercial collaborations or aspects of their domestic lives. Bloggers are thus very cautious about the guidelines and reluctant to divulge any additional information regarding their work.

Thirdly, autonomy and self-expression are some of the core values in lifestyle blogging. Many established professional and semi-professional bloggers have been running their blogs independently for years before there were any guidelines in place to restrict their authorship. To them, the guidelines that have been constructed without their inside knowledge and expertise appear impractical and even intrusive, and they wish they could have participated in the process of drafting these guidelines. Here autonomy also refers to the "expressive project" lifestyle blogs provide for many bloggers.

From early years on, it has been part of lifestyle blogs' core content that bloggers write about, for example, the clothes or a piece furniture they have bought, and contemplate the strengths and weaknesses of the product not only in their blog posts, but in the comment boxes among the readers' comments as well. In this context, then, it is not difficult to see how easily lifestyle blogs can be turned into market places. In surreptitious advertising, readers may not even acknowledge that their role in this process has shifted from a reader to that of a consumer as they are consciously left uninformed about it.

Surreptitious or hidden advertising is one of the unfortunate by-products of commercialisation in lifestyle blogs, which provide a convenient platform for certain actors in online marketing. The biggest advantage advertising has to gain from lifestyle blogs is the sense of communality and trust emerging from the relationship between bloggers and blog readers. As readers have already established a group of like-minded people following a given blog, they also provide a lucrative focus group for peer marketing.

NOTES

1 The word 'blog' is a contraction of the words 'web' and 'log' also known as weblog. Blogs have developed considerably since the word was first used about a website in 1997. (Rettberg 2008, 15–16.)
2 For more on the professionalisation of the Finnish blogosphere, see the advertising agency Manifesto's blog barometers 2014 and 2013. As Manifesto does not produce scientific information, the barometer is used here only as a heuristic device, describing the overall development of the blogosphere in Finland.
3 The estimation is based on the fact that many of the oldest lifestyle blogs still in existence in Finland were first established in the mid-2000s.
4 For more on the commercialisation of the Finnish blogosphere, see the advertising agency Manifesto's blog barometers 2014 and 2015.
5 The translations in this article from Finnish to English are by the author.
6 The Finnish Guidelines for Consumer Protection 2013 are referred to as GCP 2013 in this article.
7 For more on the Swedish Consumer Agency's guidelines, see Ung Konsumentet 2013.
8 The FTC's Endorsement Guides 2013.
9 A blog archive consists of series of blog post written and maintained by an individual blogger. It is customary in the blogosphere that bloggers sometimes stop writing their original blog and move on in order to establish a new blog. In instances like these, the previous blog posts usually follow into the new blog. Sometimes, however, bloggers choose to limit the access to their previous blogs or blog posts, thus making them unavailable to the reader.
10 There are 37 blog posts in total analysed in this article (2015 [2], 2014 [3], 2013 [19], 2012 [2], 2011 [5], 2010, [1], 2009 [3], 2008 [2]).
11 There are also several other instances providing similar guidelines or instructions for bloggers such as the Finnish blog portal Indiedays. The CPA is, however, the only legally binding set of regulations that limit advertising in the Finnish blogosphere. All guidelines mentioned above are based on the CPA. The reason there are so many different kinds of guidelines available is that, as a legal act, the CPA is not very practical to use in everyday blogging. Blog portals also want to make it clear that they do not endorse surreptitious advertising.
12 The term "Golden Age" is mentioned three separate times in the blog posts analysed for this study. According to my ethnographic observations, the "Golden Age" is a concept that is also widely used in the Finnish blogosphere especially in the context of the professionalisation of the trade.
13 The brackets are in the original text.
14 Bloggers have also built small businesses that benefit from their online visibility based on e.g. online shops, book projects and lectures.
15 There are also studies arguing that the small number of comments in blogs reflects the fact that they are not that important for bloggers (cf. Subrahmanyam 2007). In the context of Finnish lifestyle blogging, however, comments are highly valued. The majority of bloggers experience the recent decline in commenting that has taken place in the Finnish blogosphere as a negative development affecting the sense of sociality in their blogs.
16 The italics are in the original text.
17 Readers follow lifestyle blogs through various kinds of platforms, such as Bloglovin', in social media. Similarly to hashtags in Twitter, blogs rely heavily on keywords that carry readers from one blog to another, making blogs visible as well as available to readers through the topic of an individual blog post.

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KEYWORDS

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