Beyond the Catwalk: Fashion Public Relations and Social Media in Australia

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Abstract
There has been limited research into fashion public relations. This study explores social media use in public relations in the Australian fashion industry, using ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest social media is transforming fashion public relations, but its adoption is uneven, with overlaps in marketing and public relations activity. Participants use social media to engage fashion publics, keep up to date with trends, monitor competitors and promote clients. Bloggers are increasingly influential. Participants perceive they must embrace social media, or risk getting left behind. The findings contribute to understanding diverse public relations practices and the ways public relations activity is transforming in response to social media.

Keywords: public relations, fashion, Australia, social media

Introduction
Little academic attention has been paid to fashion public relations (fashion PR), which is often perceived as superficial and frivolous, and associated with marketing, promotion and image management. In this study, fashion PR refers to the public relations role in managing fashion labels or brands, rather than celebrity or model management. Sherman and Perlman define fashion PR as ‘being in touch with the company’s audiences, creating strong relationships with them, reaching out to the media, initiating messages that project positive images of the company, assuming social responsibility, and even adjusting company policies’ (2010, p. xix). The use of social media, such as blogs, microblogging, podcasting, photo and video
sharing sites, social networks and virtual worlds, is now widespread in Australian fashion PR. This paper addresses calls to investigate the full range of public relations activities beyond the corporate sector (L’Etang, 2006; Noricks, 2006). Exploring social media use in fashion PR may offer new understandings of public relations in an increasingly networked world.

The aim of this research, therefore, is to investigate practitioner perceptions of social media use in public relations in a niche sector: the Australian fashion industry. The paper is structured in five sections. The first section offers an overview of social media use in the fashion industry, drawing on public relations scholarship and fashion industry commentators. The next section introduces examples of fashion PR campaigns using social media. The third section outlines the research design, incorporating an ethnographic study and interviews with fashion PR practitioners. The fourth section presents the themes which emerged from the analysis of practitioner interviews and ethnographic research: social media use, engaging publics and working with bloggers. In the final section, the implications for understandings of the impact of social media on fashion PR and public relations are discussed.

Background

Social media and fashion PR

In a related study, the authors found the boundaries between marketing and public relations tended to blur in fashion PR, and that fashion PR is marginalised in mainstream definitions of public relations, which present public relations as a professional and strategic management activity, suppressing associations with press agency and publicity (Cassidy & Fitch, n.d.). The fashion industry was initially slow to adopt social media; some labels ignored the trend, while others used it only for sales and promotional purposes (Wright, 2009). However, industry commentators perceive the role of fashion PR practitioners now is to help ‘clients manage the new, constantly changing paradigm of digital fashion communications’ (Amed, 2011, para. 2). Wright, founder and publisher of FashionablyMarketing.Me, notes the significance of social media for the industry:

In the hopes of reviving sales, generating larger customer bases and finding more cost effective marketing outlets, fashion brands, designers and retailers have flocked to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as the social media tools of choice. (2009, para. 1)
The shift to online means social media is integral to fashion PR. Practitioners budget for social media activity (Experian, 2012a), integrating online and traditional campaign strategies (Experian, 2012b).

Although not referring specifically to fashion PR, studies reveal public relations practitioners are experimenting with social media in professional contexts (Robson & James, 2012) and its adoption is erratic (Macnamara, 2011), with a tendency to use social media for one-way communication, particularly for marketing and brand promotion purposes (Macnamara, 2010). Similarly, Greenhill (2011, para. 12) argues that fashion brands suffer from ‘paper pixel syndrome’, forcing traditional media relations and promotional activity onto social media platforms without any changes, thereby failing to exploit the interactivity of social media. Industry commentators present mixed understandings of social media, suggesting it is inherently a marketing function, contributing to ‘sales’ and increasing ‘customer bases’ (Wright, 2009, para. 1) or reaching new and broader audiences resulting in publicity (Prabhakar, 2010). These understandings suggest fashion PR’s social media use has resulted in a convergence of public relations and marketing functions. Noricks perceives social media is transforming fashion PR, in that it potentially enables more engagement with fashion publics rather than just media relations:

Traditionally, PR tactics focused on gaining media attention, while marketing focused more on customer sales. However, social media has changed the playing field a bit, and PR is now concerned with more than just media and may be more involved in customer relationship building. (2012, p. 16)

The challenge for fashion PR practitioners, more accustomed to developing relationships with fashion journalists and traditional media outlets, is how to develop ways of engaging fashion publics in an industry where online shopping is increasingly a ‘socially connected event’ (Wright, 2011, para. 5) and fashion publics share their product wish lists and purchases with social network sites. In addition to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, fashion PR practitioners have embraced social media platforms such as Tumblr, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest, Foursquare and increasingly Ebay Fashion Gallery to ‘facilitate real-time and genuine relationships with consumers’ (Akahoshi, 2012, p. 11), allowing fashion labels to connect with fashion publics and providing publicity that an advertising budget simply cannot buy (Prabhakar, 2010). For example, international luxury brands are designing campaigns around user-generated content. Burberry’s ‘Art of the Trench’ campaign encouraged users to upload images of themselves wearing a Burberry trench coat (Burberry, n.d.; Business of Fashion, 2012) and Jimmy Choo’s Choo 24:7 Stylemakers campaign encouraged fans to
post street-style images to its website and via Instagram and Twitter (Business of Fashion, 2012; Jimmy Choo, 2012).

Australian fashion PR practitioners use social media and digital platforms to reach and engage fashion publics. Fashion PR agencies tweet on behalf of clients and some designers use Twitter to let followers get up close and personal. For example, designer Aurelio Costarella (see @ACostarella) tweets promotional and personal messages, pictures, re-tweets from followers, and replies to fans. More broadly, fashion labels are embracing ‘bricks and clicks’ (i.e. physical and online shops) and even ‘e-tail’ (online only) models (Experian, 2012a, p. 3). Perth fashion entrepreneur Zara Bryson closed one of her boutiques to focus on the online world, acknowledging the value of social media in driving traffic to the online store (Davies, 2012). Australian fashion label Miishka successfully established its business solely through Facebook, before setting up an online store (Facebook, 2012).

Even traditional media publications have embraced social media to engage fashion publics. Vogue Australia uses Twitter for ‘see it first and tweet it first’ fashion news and Tumblr for ‘visual feasting’; behind-the-scenes fashion moments can be found on Instagram; and Facebook is used as a platform for consumers to interact with the magazine’s editors (Vogue, 2012, p. 68). In addition, fashion bloggers have emerged as expert fashion commentators, shaping brands and significantly influencing what is on-trend (Dalto, 2010; Kurutz, 2011). The presence of bloggers at fashion festivals illustrates how influential blogging has become, with Perth Fashion Festival (PFF) director Mariella Harvey-Hanrahan describing them as ‘a valuable and powerful tool in helping PFF spread the word about Western Australia’s amazing creative industry’ (as cited in Westlake, 2011, p. 26). Yet Jacob claims public relations practitioners ‘are still learning to treat bloggers as more than an easy PR hit’ (as cited in Griffith, 2011, p. 3). One challenge for fashion PR practitioners is how to develop ethical ways of working with bloggers as there is a ‘line to be drawn between cash for comment, and paying bloggers’ (Demilta, 2012, para. 12).

**Social media campaigns in Australian fashion PR**

Social media provides fashion PR practitioners with opportunities to build brand reputation and awareness, gain media attention, and interact with fashion publics (Business of Fashion, 2009; Noricks, 2012). Australian retailers David Jones and Myer live-streamed their Spring Summer 2012–13 collection launches, allowing social media users to take a ‘virtual’ front row seat. The department stores used a multi-channel strategy, with online platforms Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube encouraging interaction with fashion publics.
However, three recent Australian social media campaigns illustrate the challenges for fashion PR practitioners seeking to meaningfully engage fashion publics. In September 2011, Gasp Jeans dominated social media discussions and mainstream news after a customer emailed Gasp management to complain about a male sales assistant’s inappropriate comments about her appearance at their Chapel Street store in Melbourne (Haddow, 2011; Sholl, 2011). Rather than an apology, the customer received a mistake-ridden response, supporting the actions of the sales assistant and suggesting the customer was an ‘undesirable’ time-waster (as cited in Sholl 2011, para. 8–9). The response received national and international media coverage, became a trending topic on Twitter, saw the fashion label’s Facebook page inundated with derogatory posts and led to the establishment of ‘We Hate Gasp’ and ‘Boycott Gasp’ Facebook groups (Cooper, 2011). Gasp promoted their public relations mishap with the view that ‘any publicity is good publicity’, (Sholl, 2011, para. 13), stating that although the email response was not a publicity stunt, the retailer was thrilled with the attention. Gasp spokesperson Matthew Chidgey (as cited in Cooper, 2011, para. 14–15) said of the customer who complained: ‘Our shops are packed, everyone knows us now and I can’t thank her enough for what she did for us.’

The Witchery ‘Man in the Jacket’ campaign was created to launch the label’s new menswear collection. In a modern day Cinderella story, the campaign featured a YouTube video of Heidi, a girl trying to find a man she met in a Sydney café who left his jacket behind. The ‘story’ received 60,000 views on YouTube after gaining the attention of the mainstream media (Macnamara, 2010). Experts estimated the campaign received over $8 million in free publicity (Bishops, 2009). A survey of 1000 men aged 28–35 the week following the stunt concluded the campaign to be a ‘social media success’ (Mumbrella, 2009a, para. 2). Witchery’s CEO Iain Naim (as cited in Mumbrella, 2009b, para. 18) stated that he was ‘very pleased’ with the outcome. However, Australian social monitoring service Streamwall labelled the hoax as a ‘viral failure’ (as cited in Mumbrella, 2009a, para. 1), suggesting the campaign was successful only as a public relations strategy rather than social media engagement. This distinction is significant in terms of this study, as it distinguishes between public relations (as spin and promotion) and social media engagement (as, presumably, a dialogic interaction with fashion publics).

In the third example, a brand repositioning exercise by an Australian clothing discounter aimed to reach their youth public ‘through a platform and language they speak’ (Mumbrella, 2011). Direct Factory Outlet (DFO) launched a public relations campaign featuring a series of videos on Facebook telling the story of ‘Zoe Walker’ and her love triangle. Viewers must ‘like’ Zoe’s Facebook page to see more of the love story, as well as
information on the clothing featured in the videos. Comments on Australia’s media and marketing website Mumbrella (2011) criticise the campaign for its lack of authenticity. Although the campaign demonstrates that DFO is embracing social media to reach fashion publics, employing an interactive platform such as Facebook does not automatically imply the company is ‘engaging’ with its target audience.

These three campaigns suggest fashion PR practitioners are struggling to use social media in ways to meaningfully engage fashion publics. The Gasp example illustrates how social media has transformed the fashion PR landscape, as newly empowered consumers directly influenced the image of a brand and generated considerable media coverage. The brand’s response was clearly inadequate. The ‘Man in the Jacket’ campaign suggests the convergence of public relations and marketing functions in social media use in the fashion industry, with its focus on increasing sales and a fictitious scenario masquerading as a modern-day love story. Similarly, DFO’s Facebook campaign does not suggest successful engagement with target publics as much as an inauthentic story developed primarily to serve sales and marketing aims.

**Research design**

This study investigates perceptions of social media in terms of the day-to-day activities and experiences of Australian fashion PR practitioners, drawing on an ethnographic study and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six practitioners. The ethnographic study took place in the public relations and events department in Perth of a national retail organisation (hereafter referred to as ‘the organisation’). The researcher worked two days a week on an unpaid basis from February to August 2011. Participant observation, with the researcher disclosing their purpose to the group under study and fully immersing themselves in their day-to-day activities, offered insights into the attitudes, routine activities, and experiences of fashion PR practitioners (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Grunig, 2008). The researcher recorded observations and conversations in keywords and phrases throughout the day, which were then written up as journal entries on a weekly basis.

Interviews were conducted in June, July and August 2011 with fashion PR practitioners in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. Ten potential interviewees, identified using internet searches and through the researcher’s professional networks, were initially contacted via email; six practitioners chose to participate, on the understanding that participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any stage. Four participants worked in public relations agencies specialising in fashion; one participant worked in-house for a designer and another worked in-house for
an international luxury fashion retailer. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of fashion PR from the practitioner perspective, using open-ended questions about experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge and background (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Patton, 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In addition to questions regarding their careers, routine activities and understandings of public relations, participants were asked about the impact of social media on fashion PR. Participants had the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and make additional comments.

The field notes and journal entries and the interview transcripts were analysed using open and pattern coding, whereby patterns, ideas and common keywords emerged directly from the participants' responses (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). This data was then organised according to dominant themes – social media use, engaging fashion publics and working with bloggers – which are used to structure the discussion in the following section. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used to report participants’ comments.

**Scope and limitations**

The focus of this paper is the use of social media in fashion PR in Australia. The findings about fashion PR in Australia are reported elsewhere (Cassidy & Fitch, n.d.). The researcher has worked part time in a retail role in the Australian fashion industry for five years and therefore is familiar with industry trends.

A significant limitation is the speed of change in both technology and social media use (Fitch, 2012). For example, the introduction of a Pinterest iPhone app in March 2011 has contributed to the widespread use of Pinterest in fashion PR (Carlson, 2012), yet this social media platform did not feature prominently in participants’ perceptions of their work at the time this research was conducted.

**Findings and discussion**

**Using social media**

All participants acknowledged the huge impact of social media on fashion PR. Social media was perceived by all participants as a medium you have to engage in, or risk getting left behind. Facebook and Twitter emerged in the practitioner interviews as a useful platform to communicate with editors, clients and consumers, to monitor competitors, and also to promote clients and products. Caitlyn noted the impact of social media on the fashion industry from all angles – public relations, media, consumers and the
designers themselves. Eva considered social media as the ‘big thing at the moment’:

Brands aren’t satisfied with only being seen in your traditional magazines and newspapers. Just to give you an example, we look after the fashion label [brand] and at the end of our Fashion Week campaign, she [the designer] was more interested to see what was online and what bloggers were talking about her as opposed to what magazines she was featured in. So that gives you an example of the weight and value people are putting towards social media now.

Not all participants, however, are embracing social media. Flynn commented that he ‘doesn’t do Twitter’ and the designer he represents manages the brand’s Facebook profile and Twitter account.

Participants suggested social media and the online world are transforming traditional public relations practices. They perceived social media was changing both the pace and function of fashion PR; for example, Flynn said: ‘People want things so immediately that a press release for a collection, [in the past] you could send out the same one for six months, but now everyone wants something very different everyday.’ Although participants acknowledged the importance of having an online presence, they suggested online activity has limitations. For example, Flynn suggested the immediacy of the internet makes it hard to offer exclusive stories or effectively manage communication campaigns. This perception reflects an observation made during the ethnographic study when a brand ambassador tweeted the confidential location of a photoshoot, thus unintentionally breaking the story to the news media.

The researcher found that social media is relatively new for the organisation and platforms such as Facebook have only been used since May 2011. The researcher observed the organisation adopts a traditional top-down communication approach in their use of social media. For example, the Facebook profile was managed nationally and content was not specifically tailored for local publics or that platform. Instead, it was predominantly used for promotion with posts about sales, in-store appearances and upcoming events. Few attempts were made to encourage user engagement and interactivity. Content which aimed to engage, such as behind-the-scenes footage from photoshoots and campaigns, questions in status updates to initiate conversation, and interviews with brand ambassadors and designers was minimal and the national office used Facebook primarily for sales promotions and announcements.
The Perth-based PR and events manager does not have access to the organisation's official Facebook site and uses her personal Facebook profile to update interstate colleagues on the progress of events by uploading pictures; she also used her Facebook page for professional networking. Despite the centralisation of the organisation's social media use in the head office, the state-based PR and events manager is a proactive user of social media. Social networking sites, blogs and local news sites are used to keep up to date with current industry trends, both in fashion and retail sectors, as well as to stay abreast of local fashion and competitor news.

The organisation uses a blog to promote the retailer's latest fashions and events; however, the national office dictates the content of blog posts. The challenge of centrally managed social media forums emerged when the researcher was asked to edit a blog post on a Perth-based designer. She recorded in her journal:

The post contained incorrect information and didn’t do justice to the designer’s latest work and its promotion of the WA fashion industry – it lacked local perspective. The blog post clearly illustrated that the organisation views social media as 'just another channel'. It wasn’t tailored for the online world, but was taken straight from a media release sent to fashion editors.

This example illustrates Greenhill’s (2011) ‘paper pixel syndrome’ whereby content developed and produced for traditional media is forced onto new media platforms without any adaptation. Interview participants more readily adapted their approach in social media.

**Relating with, or marketing to, publics**

Analysis of the journal and field notes suggests the organisation’s use of social media blurs the boundaries between public relations and marketing, as akin to the DFO example, the organisation treats social media as new channels to reach consumers rather than engage fashion publics. Online communication is used predominantly for promotional purposes and to drive sales. This use of social media corresponds with Macnamara’s (2010) findings and reinforces the convergence between public relations and marketing roles. In contrast, interview participants perceived social media empowers fashion publics, recognising the capacity of consumers to share their thoughts about a brand can be powerful. Anna said:

It’s amazing the research around customer perceptions and how a customer will probably trust a total stranger who is giving a positive affirmation about a product more than they’ll
trust the brand itself. So if you’re on Facebook as a brand, it’s not about you saying ‘we’re the best,’ it’s about the actual anecdotes you have from your devotees, because that’s more meaningful and you’ll definitely get more of an outcome from that.

Caitlyn agreed that social media has created a power shift in favour of fashion publics: ‘It’s bringing the consumers closer to the brands, as displayed during RAFW [Rosemount Australian Fashion Week]. An everyday Australian could feel like they were front row simply by logging onto Twitter.’ Eva suggested social media has created a more reciprocal relationship between client and consumer: ‘You’re now able to engage people that are actually really interested in engaging with you and they can talk back to you – so it’s not just a one-way conversation anymore, it’s two-way.’

In contrast to the organisation’s social media use, interview participants’ comments suggest fashion publics are viewed as autonomous in that they control how they engage with online brands, rather than being the target of promotional campaigns. These responses do not imply that social media is used solely to generate sales. Rather than embracing social media to contribute to marketing objectives, participants seek to meaningfully engage fashion publics. This finding suggests participants distinguish between public relations and marketing functions, as they perceive public relations through social media is not functioning solely to support marketing efforts but rather fashion PR aims; that is, to achieve an ongoing dialogic engagement with fashion publics. For example, Caitlyn said her role involves ‘telling the stories’ of clients to the media and public in an ‘exciting and engaging way’. However, all participants except for Caitlyn perceived fashion PR to be part of the marketing mix, observing fashion PR was a more cost-effective and localised option, if somewhat ambiguous and unstructured in its results in comparison with sales and marketing (Cassidy & Fitch, n.d.). For these participants, there was not a clear distinction in their fashion PR activity between public relations and marketing. According to Anna, whose job title is Public Relations and Marketing Manager: ‘I’m not doing marketing one day and publicity the next. They blend with each other.’

**Working with bloggers**

Analysis of participant responses suggests in-house blogs are not yet a prominent fashion PR activity. However, Dana reiterated the growing importance of working with fashion and lifestyle bloggers, suggesting she treats certain bloggers in the same regard as fashion editors:
I don’t have time to talk to every blogger … but we look for those that have some sort of credibility about them and we work with those directly and we have a relationship with them as we would with someone from a newspaper.

Other participants acknowledged the growing influence of bloggers. Caitlyn said ‘bloggers are … playing a huge part in changing the face of the fashion industry; labels and designers must interact with bloggers’. Flynn explained how he adapted his work in response to the expectations and demands of fashion bloggers:

They all want different answers and they all want to delve a bit deeper and get more of an insight into the label rather than just the concepts behind the collection. So I find that rather than doing a press release, I will just do a statement paragraph of the collection with a quote from [the designer] and then everyday I’m pretty much answering similar questions in a different way to people.

However, participants also identified particular challenges around evaluating the influence and credibility of bloggers, which Bethany described as ‘increasingly difficult’, and potential ethical issues. Eva noted the potential ethical issues of paying bloggers, commenting that blogs are ‘essentially no different to a magazine – they’ve had products sent to them for free and are trying to portray a certain lifestyle that’s maybe not very realistic’. Some participants asserted they treated high-profile bloggers as they would fashion editors, by inviting them to fashion shows and offering them free products. There was no discussion of payment to bloggers. Other participants acknowledged that many bloggers wanted more than a standard media release or media kit, suggesting fashion PR activity was transforming in response to the demands of bloggers, as one – increasingly significant – kind of fashion public.

**Conclusion**

It can be concluded social media is transforming fashion PR, by changing the way designers and brands interact and engage with fashion publics. Fashion PR appears to be in a state of flux, with some practitioners using social media to engage diverse fashion publics, including bloggers, fashion journalists and consumers. In practice, much online activity appears to be aimed at generating sales. However, participants in this study had mixed understandings of their work, perceiving significant overlaps between public relations and marketing objectives and suggesting public relations, particularly through social media, was a cheaper and less structured way to promote a fashion brand or label through engagement, storytelling and
encouraging consumers to share their fashion interests. At the same time, the researcher’s observations in the ethnographic study suggest some fashion PR practitioners are struggling to adapt traditional communication strategies, such as employing a hierarchical ‘top-down’ communication model, adapting communication for different platforms and maintaining exclusivity of news stories in a social media environment. In particular, the distinction between marketing and public relations functions in fashion PR is even less clear as practitioners grapple with the potential of social media for interactivity and engagement.

This study is unique in its investigation of social media use in Australian fashion PR. Drawing on practitioner perceptions and an ethnographic study, it offers new insights into public relations activity in niche sectors. The first insight suggests fashion PR practitioners have embraced social media; however it may be used to drive sales and increase revenue rather than to actively engage and interact with fashion publics. As such, it is difficult to distinguish between marketing and public relations functions. The second insight emerging from the findings reported in this study, and confirming Noricks’ (2012) suggestion, is that fashion PR activity is transforming in response to social media; its focus is less exclusively media relations, as practitioners are increasingly responsible for communicating with fashion publics across multiple social media platforms on behalf of their client or employer. As such, it is unclear when publicity and promotion become engagement and dialogue, suggesting dominant understandings of public relations may not adequately reflect contemporary public relations activity. The third insight is the changing perceptions of publics; interview participants viewed publics as autonomous social media users who followed their own interests rather than as passive recipients of brand messages. This insight suggests traditional public relations concepts such as target publics are no longer relevant. The final insight is the significance of social media for the fashion industry: fashion publics increasingly experience fashion through blogs, tweets, digital fashion shows and a range of social media platforms, as well as online shopping. As such, social media is integral to fashion PR.

The research reported in this paper suggests that social media use in fashion PR offers significant insights into broader understandings of public relations activity and the impact of social media on communication practice. Distinctions between promotion, publicity and public relations are difficult to sustain in a social media environment and these findings suggest the need for more research into diverse public relations activity. Investigating public relations activity in a niche sector, the Australian fashion industry, provides a unique contribution to the public relations body of knowledge, informing new understandings of public relations in a networked world.
Beyond the Catwalk

References


