Beyond the Catwalk

Investigating the Use of Public Relations in the Australian Fashion Industry

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations with Honours at Murdoch University, 2011.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Bachelor of Communication in Public Relations with Honours

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Leah Marie Cassidy

2011
ABSTRACT

The dominant paradigm in public relations theory positions public relations as a management function within a corporate environment. It argues that two-way ‘professional’ rather than one-way ‘craft’ practice is the most ethical form of public relations. However, this approach has contributed limited theoretical insights into public relations practices outside of a managerial, corporate setting. This thesis therefore aims to investigate public relations in a niche environment, the Australian fashion industry, employing a multi-method qualitative research design of ethnography and practitioner interviews. Drawing on an analysis of the researcher’s observations and experiences in the Australian fashion industry, as well as the perceptions of fashion PR practitioners, this thesis argues that fashion PR has been relegated to a ‘craft’ i.e. a non-professional practice in an effort to confirm public relations’ status as a professional activity. This thesis reveals that fashion PR is marginalised from mainstream understandings of public relations due to its association with marketing, promotion and publicity, its highly feminised domain, and its reputation as a glamorous, yet superficial occupation. The findings of this thesis suggest the theoretical gap between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ public relations practices cannot be sustained, and therefore the dominant paradigm is not an adequate conceptual model for embracing the diversity of public relations practices. Investigating the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry provides a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge underpinning public relations, informing new understandings of the industry by examining the work performed and drawing on the perceptions of practitioners.
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“Those of us who think that fashion itself is an important area of academic study are still in a minority, often the subject of sarcastic remarks.”

- Pamela Church Gibson
INTRODUCTION

The push for professional status remains a prominent concern within public relations scholarship. An indistinct domain of expertise, encroachment from other occupations, feminisation of the industry, and weak theoretical development have all contributed to the low standing of the public relations industry. This thesis therefore explores the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism by exploring the perceptions and experiences of practitioners in one sector.

Although new theories of public relations have emerged, J. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models of public relations continue to dominate mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations. The U.S. scholars distinguish public relations practices according to a ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ continuum, positioning ‘professional’ public relations using two-way symmetrical communication as the most appropriate and ethical practice to ensure excellence in communication. This understanding of public relations has become known in public relations literature as the ‘dominant paradigm’ for the discipline (Pieczka 2006; McKie & Munshi, 2007; L’Etang 2008; Roper 2009). However, critics argue that the dominant paradigm offers an idealistic, normative theory of how public relations should be practised, and is not reflective of industry practices. This thesis therefore investigates the relevance of the dominant paradigm for understanding the diversity of public relations practices by focusing on public relations practices and the perceptions of public relations practitioners of their work in one industry sector.

Public relations is often viewed as a support function of marketing. Encroachment from the marketing discipline has contributed to the ambiguity and low occupational
standing of the public relations industry. Public relations scholars, such as J. Grunig and Hunt (1984), sought to claim professional status for public relations by defining it as a management function operating within a corporate environment. However, emerging from this thesis is the proposition that defining public relations as a management practice suppresses public relations activity in a non-corporate, non-managerial capacity, ignoring the diversity of public relations practices. This thesis therefore aims to explore the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. Through the exploration of fashion public relations (hereafter referred to as fashion PR), this thesis investigates the suitability of the dominant paradigm as an adequate conceptual model for the field. It suggests J. Grunig and Hunt’s ‘ideal’ two-way symmetrical model is not reflective of industry practices and fails to consider the heterogeneous nature of public relations.

The lack of research on the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry has limited the understanding of fashion PR to reputation or image management. A qualitative research approach, using ethnography and semi-structured interviews, is used in this study to gain theoretical insights into the fashion PR field drawn from the perspectives of practitioners. This thesis argues that fashion PR has been relegated to ‘craft’ practices in an effort to maintain public relations’ image as a corporate activity and drive towards professionalism. The findings of this research will inform new understandings of public relations, by exploring the practice in a non-corporate sector and examining the work performed. It will provide a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge underpinning the public relations industry and encourage further studies on public relations practices operating outside
of a corporate environment in order to embrace and fully recognise the diversity of the field.

The notion of ‘fashion PR’ consists of weak boundaries and imprecise definitions. For the purpose of this thesis, fashion PR does not constitute celebrity or model management, but rather the public relations role in managing fashion labels and designers. Although alternative theories of public relations exist, this research is restricted to investigating the relevance of the dominant symmetrical worldview of public relations in relation to public relations practices in the fashion industry. By investigating the role of public relations in the Australian fashion industry, this thesis aims to develop new theoretical insights for public relations; the analysis of the perspectives of fashion PR practitioners suggests the unsuitability of the dominant paradigm for understanding public relations practice.

The use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry will be explored in five chapters. Chapter One discusses the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism and the influence of the dominant paradigm on mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations. The aim of this chapter is to introduce the dominant paradigm and suggest its failure to address the heterogeneous nature and full range of public relations practices. Chapter One considers alternative theories of public relations, which may be better equipped to understand the dynamic, complex and fluid nature of public relations practices.

The purpose of Chapter Two is to introduce fashion PR and the Australian fashion industry in order to provide the context in which this research takes place. The aim of
this chapter is to provide insights into a practice that has received little academic attention from public relations scholars. It therefore reviews the limited scholarship of fashion PR as well as industry commentary through trade journals and websites. In addition, Chapter Two introduces the Australian fashion industry to establish its significance and to review existing practices, drawing on recent case studies highlighting the use of social media in fashion PR campaigns. The analysis of social media case studies aims to determine whether the fashion PR sector is embracing the potential social media provides to meaningfully engage with target publics, or using social media primarily for promotional or marketing purposes.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology used to gain insight into the fashion PR specialty. It aims to justify the use of a qualitative paradigm to explore public relations in the Australian fashion industry, a field which has received no academic attention from public relations scholars to date. A qualitative research approach allows practitioner perceptions and experiences to inform the use of public relations in the fashion sector. Chapter Three provides a transparent overview of the steps taken to gather data for this research through an ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews.

Chapters Four and Five report and discuss the findings of my ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews respectively. Drawing on the researcher’s observations and experiences, and the analysis of fashion PR practitioners’ perceptions and experiences, these chapters contribute to a deeper understanding of the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. Chapters Four and Five challenge mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations, informing new
understandings of public relations drawn from practitioners’ interpretations of their work in the fashion PR field.
CHAPTER ONE
LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this chapter is to suggest the failure of the dominant paradigm of public relations scholarship to acknowledge the diversity of public relations practices. In exploring the public relations industry’s drive toward professionalism, this chapter proposes that the industry’s quest for professional status has suppressed public relations activities functioning outside of a corporate, managerial setting. This chapter begins by reviewing dominant theoretical perspectives of public relations and the drive towards professionalism. The public relations industry’s push to be defined as a management function within a corporate environment is discussed, with a focus on the split between managerial (‘professional’) and technician (‘craft’) roles. Finally, different conceptual understandings of public relations are offered through a critique of the dominant paradigm. The low occupational standing of the public relations industry has engaged public relations scholars in an ongoing effort to achieve professional recognition for the discipline. So far, professionalism remains an elusive goal (van Ruler 2005; L’Etang 2008). However, what constitutes a profession is complicated by the multiple and diverse conceptualisations of the term. Two approaches are commonly used to conceptualise professionalism in public relations (de Bussy & Wolf 2009). Stemming from the work of sociologists, the trait approach identifies key characteristics possessed by professionals (see Pieczka & L’Etang 2006; L’Etang 2008). Other studies see professionalism linked to the roles performed by public relations practitioners (see Kim & Hon 1998; Karadjov, Kim & Karavasilev 2000). Studies using the ‘roles’ approach define professionalism in terms of ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ practices stemming from J. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models of public relations. Defining public relations as a management
function, the U.S. scholars claim that ‘professional’ public relations is achieved through the use of two-way symmetrical communication. This understanding of public relations is recognised in public relations literature as the ‘dominant paradigm’ for the discipline (Pieczka 2006; McKie & Munshi, 2007; L’Etang 2008; Roper 2009).

Four Models of Public Relations and Professionalism

Drawing on an organisational systems theory, J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations. Claiming the models reflect the historical evolution of public relations practice, they were labelled – press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical. Across a continuum, press agentry and public information make up ‘craft’ practices; the two-way models form a continuum of ‘professional’ practices (J. Grunig & L. Grunig 1992; J. Grunig et al. 1995; Leitch & Neilson 1997; Pieczka 2006). J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992, 312) suggest that:

To [practitioners of craft public relations], the purpose of public relations is to get publicity or information into the media or other channels of communication. Practitioners of professional public relations, in contrast, rely on a body of knowledge as well as technique and see public relations as having a strategic purpose for an organization.

In line with the Excellence Theory, generated from the findings of studies aimed to determine what constitutes ‘excellence’ in public relations, scholars (see J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier 2006; J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Toth 2007) position ‘professional’ public relations using two-way symmetrical communication as the most effective and ethical practice. J. Grunig, L. Grunig and Dozier (2006) argue that the two-way symmetrical model ensures mutually beneficial relationships and ‘excellence’ in
public relations. However, Pieczka (2006, 355) argues that J. Grunig and Hunt’s attempt to develop a normative theory of public relations through the use of two-way symmetrical communication, has positioned the remaining three of the four models of communication as public relations that is “not quite right, dysfunctional.” This thesis argues that the idea of symmetry advocated by J. Grunig and Hunt’s dominant paradigm not only fails to consider the heterogeneous nature of the industry, but also inadequately reflects the reality of public relations practices, which Gordon (1997) suggests, are most commonly based on one-way communication methods.

In this sense, it can also be argued that the deployment of the dominant paradigm to push the professional status of public relations is normative to J. Grunig and Hunt’s perception of what a public relations professional should be. This ideology is also evident in the trait approach often used to conceptualise professionalism in public relations. Drawing from the work of Carr-Saunders (1966), this approach defines ‘profession’ according to a body of complex formal knowledge, an ethical approach to work (Freidson 1986), and specialised education and training (Millerson 1964). Critics argue that the trait approach is an ideal-typical construction that only tells us what a profession pretends to be not what it is (Hughes 1958; M. Larson 1977; Breit & Demetrious 2010). Although sociologists abandoned the trait approach in the 1970s (Pieczka & L’Etang 2006), consistent efforts have been made in the public relations industry to develop these characteristics, namely through industry bodies such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) as well as through the inclusion of public relations in university curricula (L’Etang 2008). However, van Ruler (2005, 159) argues that “in defining what professionalism is all about, practitioners and scholars live in different worlds.” Van Ruler (2005) offers an
alternative framework of four models for understanding professionalism. She suggests that scholars perceive professionalism according to the trait approach (the ‘knowledge’ model as she calls it), whereas practitioners perceive personality, and creativity as the most important characteristics in their field. These traits suggest practitioners subscribe to the ‘personality’ model of professionalism. According to Abbott (1988), a profession is defined through the way in which the day-to-day activities of an occupational group reveal links to professionalism. Abbott’s approach reinforces the need to understand fashion PR in terms of the work carried out by practitioners, rather than through mainstream understandings of what constitutes professionalism in public relations. The public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism through the promotion of the industry as a management function is discussed in the following section.

Public Relations as a Management Function

Hutton (1999, 199) asserts that: “In terms of both theory and practice, public relations has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its scope, or its underlying dimensions.” More than a decade on, Hutton’s assertion is still valid, with more than 500 definitions of public relations estimated to exist (Morris & Goldsworthy 2008). The highly influential, though heavily critiqued, work of J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) sought to claim professional status for public relations by defining it as a management practice (J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier 2006; Hatherell & Bartlett 2006; Fitch & Third 2010). In their introductory text Managing Public Relations, J. Grunig and Hunt (1984, 6) define public relations as the “management of
communication between an organization and its publics.” In a review of eight prominent public relations texts (see Harlow 1976; J. Grunig & Hunt 1984; Simon 1984; Crable & Vibbert 1986; Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994; Wilcox, Ault & Agee 1995; Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg 1996; Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore 1997), Gordon (1997) revealed most definitions of ‘public relations’ employ three key terms: ‘management’, ‘organisation’ and ‘publics’. Of the eight texts, seven presented public relations as a ‘management function’ or the ‘management of communication’. Similarly, Tymson, P. Lazar and R. Lazar (2002) believe that Australian public relations practitioners are part of an organisation’s management team. Gordon (1997, 60-61) notes, “defining public relations by its management characteristic serves to promote the importance of public relations departments within an organization.” However, McKie and Munshi (2007, 13) argue that “PR has also had a significant non-corporate and non-government history. PR, from the distant past to the online present, operates outside of, as well as inside of, the management function.”

This thesis therefore proposes that conceptualising public relations as a management function aimed to address concerns about the low occupational standing of the industry. It suggests that defining public relations in this way suppresses public relations activity functioning in a non-corporate, non-managerial capacity, ignoring the dynamic and complex nature of public relations practices. Although limited, it is worth noting that academic research into niche public relations practices such as sport, health, and tourism is beginning to emerge (see L’Etang 2006a). However, the notion of public relations as a management function continues to dominate theoretical perspectives of public relations.
Public Relations Roles

Emphasising public relations as a management function stems from Broom and Dozier’s (1986) research into roles, which conceptualises public relations practitioners as either ‘managers’ or ‘technicians’ (Dozier & Broom 2006; Pieczka 2006). Technicians perform ‘craft’ practices, acting as a support function and implementing communication programs containing policy decisions made by others. In contrast, managers fulfill ‘professional’ practices and are part of the organisation’s dominant coalition, that is, the top-management team responsible for strategic decision-making (Dozier 1990, 1992; White & Dozier 1992; Dozier, L. Grunig & J. Grunig 1995). According to the Excellence Theory discussed earlier in this chapter, to be effective public relations must function as part of the dominant coalition. (J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier 2006). However, Gordon (1997, 61) argues that:

The normative conceptualization that public relations is or “should” be a part of the dominant coalition reflects the assumption that public relations gains influence through or from the dominant coalition. . . . If it is our goal to advance public relations, should we not consider that power can be self-cultivated as opposed to being taken from or shared with organizational dominant coalitions?

This thesis suggests that the necessity for public relations practitioners to be part of the dominant coalition stems from the industry’s desire to be recognised as a key contributor to organisational effectiveness and therefore accord the industry professional status (Fitch & Third 2010).

Further amplifying the public relations industry’s pre-existing anxieties about the role of public relations in organisational settings was the dramatic increase in the number of women entering the field. In Australia, the proportion of women working in public relations increased from 10 percent in the early 1970s, to approximately 50 percent in the early 1980s (Zawawi 2009; Fitch & Third 2010). Greg Smith, author
of the thesis “The Predominance of Women in Public Relations” (2006, 2), shows that more than a decade on, the Australian public relations industry remains female-dominated.

As (almost) everyone in the Australian public relations industry knows, there are more women than men. On average, the numbers . . . favour women by slightly more than three to one. However, the figures are alarmingly high, and, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, make PR one of the most female-intensive industries in Australia.

This ‘feminisation’ of public relations has had implications on the status and reputation of the industry “as both a profession and as a management discipline” (Fitch & Third 2010, 3). As L. Grunig, Toth and Hon (2001, 4) state: “Any field suddenly shifting to a female majority - or even experiencing the hint of more women than men - faces the realities of dwindling salary, status, and influence within the organization.”

Coinciding with the feminisation of public relations was the industry’s push for a professional status. This “historical coincidence” was examined by Fitch and Third (2010, 1), who argue that the process of feminisation and professionalisation were co-emergent.

Indeed, we argue that the industry’s promotion of itself as a profession, primarily through professional associations but also through its inclusion in university curricula and scholarship, is in part a response generated by a concern about the feminisation of the public relations industry. (Fitch & Third 2010, 6)

As the feminisation of the industry was charged with excluding public relations from the dominant coalition (Aldoory 2005), the push to professionalise the industry resulted in a gendered division of roles (L. Grunig, Toth & Hon 2001; Fitch & Third 2010). Although Rea (2002) argues that women are increasingly taking up senior
roles in public relations, industry surveys (see Broom 1982; Broom & Dozier 1986; Dozier & Broom 1995) confirmed that women were more likely than men to be assigned to the technician role. Reinforcing the argument of Fitch and Third (2010), this thesis suggests that the influx of women entering the public relations field contributed to the industry’s drive towards professionalism in order to position public relations as a management function within a corporate environment. Such a suggestion provides a new insight to the distinction between managerial and technician roles expressed in J. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models of public relations.

 Strategic Communication

Hallahan et al. (2007, 3) define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission.” The authors acknowledge that various professional fields, for example, management, marketing, advertising, and public relations, are involved in the planning, implementation and assessment of an organisation’s communication. Similarly, Tymson, P. Lazar and R. Lazar (2002) outline the stages of strategic communication in terms of objective setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Hallahan et al. (2007) note that there are multiple understandings of the term ‘strategic’ when applied to communication practices. Associating the term with a management approach is common. The role of communication in this approach is to ensure information transfer from upper management (i.e. managers) to the subordinate (i.e. technicians), with an emphasis on communicating management’s organisational goals. Presenting strategic communication as a management practice has been strengthened by teaching
strategic planning in undergraduate public relations, advertising and marketing degrees. Hallahan et al. (2007, 11) suggest that the rather “formulaic management by objectives approach” is used, emphasising goal setting, action plans, and measurable outcomes. Despite its many-faceted meanings, strategic communication “emphasises the role of communication as a management practice” (Hallahan et al. 2007). It is for this reason that public relations, a field aspiring to be recognised as a management discipline, has aligned itself with strategic communication. Demonstrating the use of strategic communication in public relations is also one of the ways public relations scholars attempt to differentiate the field from being part of the ‘marketing mix’ (Noricks 2006).

Defining the Boundaries: Public Relations and Marketing

Public relations is often seen as a support function of marketing (Stroh 2007). Hutton (2001) acknowledges that the relationship between public relations and marketing is constantly defined by the marketing side. The marketing academic community views public relations as part of the ‘marketing mix’. Marketing theorists define the ‘mix’ through four Ps – Product, Price, Place and Promotion. Initially researched and explained by Harvard economist Neil Borden (1984), the theory suggests that a successful business needs the right Product, at the right Price, in the right Place and using the right Promotion (Bohdanowicz & Clamp 1994; Jackson & Shaw 2009). Public relations is considered useful in that it assists with profit-making through the fourth ‘P’ (promotion) of the marketing mix (Johnston & Zawawi 2009). However, public relations scholars (Ehling, White & J. Grunig 1992; Duffy 2000; Stroh 2007) argue that public relations serves a different function from marketing. Ehling, White
and J. Grunig (1992) claim public relations utilises two-way methods in both design and delivery of messages, as opposed to marketing practices, which are essentially unilateral. In other words, public relations is two-way symmetrical (J. Grunig 1992); marketing is two-way asymmetrical (Iacobucci & Hibbard 1999). In addition, L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Dozier (2002) argue that public relations aims for mutually satisfying relationships, whereas marketing is based on exchange relationships (Iacobucci & Hibbard 1999). An apparent difference between public relations and marketing is also evident in the stakeholders served by the fields. Public relations is concerned with building relationships with all stakeholders (Ledingham 2003), as opposed to marketing, which builds relationships with clients, customers and suppliers (Sudharshan 1995; Iacobucci & Ostrom 1996; Stroh 2007). One of the key differences articulated by Stroh (2007) is that public relations saves money for the organisation, while marketing makes money for the organisation by developing strong relationships between the organisation and its markets.

Although public relations scholars continue to maintain that public relations and marketing serve different functions, there is “a widespread belief among public relations firms that public relations is nothing more than product publicity, and, hence, a part of marketing’s promotional mix” (Ehling, White & J. Grunig 1992, 367). However, Hutton (2001, 209) believes that public relations scholars, such as J. Grunig, continue to “dismiss or ignore a constructive partnership between marketing and public relations”, insisting the dominant paradigm is the only correct model of practice. Therefore, this thesis suggests that separating public relations from marketing, i.e. defining public relations as a distinct field of practice, is part of the public relations industry’s push for professional recognition. Dismissing its
The Dominant Paradigm

Because public relations theory is “dominated by a corporatist ideology stemming from a particular US business tradition” (Mackey 2001, iv), the appropriateness of applying the dominant paradigm to practices in other contexts is questionable (Sriramesh 2009). Studies (see Kim & Hon 1998; Karadjov, Kim & Karavasilev 2000) tend to question the extent to which Western constructs or ‘Grunigian’ typologies apply to the environment under study (Daymon & Hodges 2009). Findings often illustrate a hybrid use of ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ models, or predominantly ‘craft’ practices, suggesting practitioners are not demonstrating ‘excellence’.

Critics, such as Leitch and Neilson (2001) and Laskin (2009) argue that the dominant paradigm provides a normative rather than positive description of the industry. In other words, they argue that J. Grunig and Hunt have offered a theory on how public relations should be practised, but in reality have provided an unrealistic and idealistic model. Similarly, L’Etang (1995) and Pieczka (1995) suggest the two-way symmetrical model is a utopian ideal that “no large and powerful organization ever does or would use” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier 2002, 310). Suggesting the two-way symmetrical model is not reflective of industry practices, Dover (1995) argues the dominant paradigm is purely an academic concept that does not have a place in the day-to-day practice of public relations. Through an exploration of public relations...
in the Australian fashion industry, this thesis investigates the suitability of the dominant paradigm as an adequate conceptual model for the field.

Furthermore, critics argue that by situating the two-way symmetrical model as an ideal, widely practised and attainable form of public relations, J. Grunig and Hunt have severed public relations historical links to persuasion (Barney & Black 1994; Edgett 2002; Pfau & Wan 2006; McCoy 2009) and propaganda (Moloney 2006; Weaver, Motion & Roper 2006; McKie & Munshi 2007; Mackey 2009) in a push for the industry to be recognised as a legitimate profession. Miller (1989, 45) referred to persuasion and public relations as “two ‘Ps’ in a pod.” He believes that although not synonymous, the terms are inextricably linked. Pfau and Wan (2006) agree, arguing that persuasion continues to have an essential function in contemporary public relations practice. Engineering a gap between public relations and propaganda can be explained as resulting from professionalisation efforts relying on an idealistic understanding of public relations (Pieczka & L’Etang 2006). Weaver, Motion and Roper (2006, 14) suggest that J. Grunig and Hunt’s promotion of two-way symmetrical communication as the most ethical and ideal model “could be construed as setting public relations apart from propaganda”:

Indeed, the process of symmetrical communication - which involves an organisation using public opinion research and engaging in public dialogue with stakeholders in the development of organisational objectives, clearly suggests a distinction from propaganda if we accept that propagandists are in the business of seeking to persuade, by one means or another, the public to buy into values or beliefs that benefit the interests of the propagandists over and above the interests of the public.

This understanding suggests that J. Grunig and Hunt’s positioning of the two-way symmetrical model as the most ‘ideal’ practice was striving to differentiate the role of public relations from propaganda as this association threatens the self-image of
public relations practitioners as aspiring professionals (L’Etang 2006b). However, J. Grunig and Hunt have not been able to conclude that the two-way symmetrical model of public relations is in fact the one predominantly practised in reality (Leitch & Neilson 1997; Laskin 2009). This shortcoming is acknowledged by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984, 43) themselves, who state, “at times, one organization will find that a different model works best for different problems.” Despite the obvious links public relations has to persuasion and propaganda, and the acknowledgement that the dominant paradigm functions as more of a normative theory, professionalism in public relations continues to be conceptualised in terms of the two-way symmetrical model. This perspective suggests an artificial distinction between one-way (‘craft’) and two-way (‘professional’) practices. This thesis explores the distinction between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ understandings of public relations through investigating practitioner perspectives of their work in a non-corporate environment.

*Alternative Perspectives*

The debate and criticism surrounding J. Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models has contributed to the emergence of alternative perspectives for understanding public relations. Public relations has been theorised through critical (L’Etang 2006b; Pieczka 2006; McKie & Munshi 2007), rhetorical (Heath, Toth & Waymer 2009; Surma 2005), ethical (Bowen 2008, 2010), postmodern (Holtzhausen 2002), and cultural (Curtin & Gaither 2005, 2007; Hodges 2006; Daymon & Hodges 2009; Daymon & Surma 2009) perspectives.
Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the characteristics of these alternative approaches, the significance of understanding fashion PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries must be noted. Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) identified cultural intermediaries as those in occupations including marketing, advertising, fashion, decoration, and public relations. In contrast to the managerial and technician roles, this perspective repositions public relations practitioners as “cultural agents operating mainly within the sites of production and consumption to create meaning through the shaping and transfer of information” (Curtin & Gaither 2005, 107). In this sense, public relations practitioners are seen as key players in the cultural economy (Nixon & Du Gay 2002). Therefore, viewing public relations as an occupational culture could potentially better inform the heterogeneous nature of public relations practices, particularly public relations in those sectors suppressed by the dominant paradigm due to their non-managerial, non-corporate nature.

In this chapter, I explored the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism by discussing dominant theoretical perspectives of public relations, particularly J. Grunig and Hunt’s dominant paradigm and their attempt to position public relations as a unique management function. I exposed the flaws in mainstream approaches to understanding the diversity of public relations practices, highlighting how the feminisation of public relations has contributed to the split between manager and technician roles, and therefore between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices. It is worth noting that fashion PR is a highly feminised domain within a feminised occupation (public relations). I argued that the dominant paradigm has contributed little understanding of public relations practices outside of a corporate environment.
Therefore, I propose there is a need for an investigation which tests the suitability of the dominant paradigm as an adequate conceptual model. In addition, this chapter revealed the blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing disciplines, a potential partnership that public relations scholars continue to ignore. In the next chapter, I examine public relations in a niche environment, the Australian fashion industry. In this chapter, I introduced mainstream understandings of public relations, whereas in Chapter Two, I will focus specifically on fashion PR.
CHAPTER TWO  
FASHION PR & THE AUSTRALIAN FASHION INDUSTRY

In the previous chapter, I explored the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism. By exposing the dominant paradigm’s failure to consider the diversity of public relations, I proposed the need to investigate the suitability of the dominant paradigm as an adequate conceptual model for the field. In this chapter, I introduce fashion PR and the Australian fashion industry in order to provide the context in which this research takes place. The aim of this chapter is to provide insights into a practice that has received little academic attention from public relations scholars. This chapter begins by reviewing the limited scholarship about fashion PR, as well as industry commentary. I then discuss the stereotypes and negative connotations surrounding the fashion industry. Following this, I introduce the Australian fashion industry, discussing its significance and reviewing existing practices. Finally, case studies are used to explore the Australian fashion industry’s use of social media for fashion PR campaigns, in order to highlight the tension between public relations and marketing activity.

Fashion PR

The use of public relations in the fashion industry can be traced back to the 1950s in Paris. Known today as the original fashion publicist, Australian born Donald Percival (Percy) Savage introduced the means of promotion to the fashion industry (Telegraph 21 Aug. 2008). Savage personified the world of fashion through public relations stunts, which earned columns of free publicity (Cuthbert 2008; Telegraph 21 Aug. 2008). Before Savage’s arrival at the fashion house of Lanvin in 1951, Paris
fashion’s governing body banned fashion advertising in the media. But in 1954, Savage arranged for Elizabeth Taylor to be pictured arriving at a Parisian film premiere wearing a Lanvin dress. Not only was mass publicity received, but Savage’s public relations stunt also pioneered the ritual - now a staple of fashion PR - of celebrities endorsing designer collections, particularly at gala events (Cuthbert 2008). Savage also introduced what are now termed ‘photo opportunities’ for fashion icons including Jackie Kennedy and Farah Dibah. He commented that

> PR is vitally important because it costs so much less than advertising. Advertising has huge budgets whereas you can get the same amount of publicity in the Times or the Telegraph for the price of a couple of good lunches. (Cuthbert 2008, par. 7; italics added)

This comment suggests that from its inception, fashion PR was perceived as a ‘cheap’ promotional tool (therefore a ‘craft’) used to gain publicity. Playing a vital role in fashion PR today, Savage understood the synergy between the media and public relations. He collaborated and was guided by fashion editors who told him how he should operate and what was of interest to them (King 2005). Moving to England in the 1970s, Savage established what is now considered as one of the ‘Big Four’ fashion trade events: London Fashion Week (Cuthbert 2008).

To date, only one piece of academic work (see Noricks 2006) has investigated public relations practice in the fashion industry; no scholarship exists specifically on public relations in the Australian fashion industry. Noricks' (2006) thesis “From Style to Strategy: An Exploratory Investigation of Public Relations Practice in the Fashion Industry” suggests the ‘craft’ style reputation of fashion PR is not a particularly accurate descriptor of the public relations speciality. Noricks (2006) calls for the ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ distinction to be re-evaluated and acknowledges the need
for public relations to be studied from a heterogeneous perspective. She suggests feminist research into fashion PR provides opportunities to develop theory and models specifically for the fashion PR speciality.

Through my research, I have identified two books dedicated in their entirety to fashion PR. Sherman and Perlman’s (2010) *Fashion Public Relations* is a U.S. textbook and appears to be used for teaching fashion PR units. *The Pocket Guide to Fashion PR* (Sheikh 2009) is a simple ‘how to’ guide for emerging fashion designers, and emphasises awareness-raising and increasing sales. No books exist on fashion PR in Australia. However, *Get Your Break! Fashion Designers* (Folder 2011) contains interviews with Australian industry experts including public relations experts. In her book *Public Relations: Concepts, Practice and Critique*, L’Etang (2008, 19) makes reference to “fashion PR” when defining the various sectors public relations is practised in. However, the example used to demonstrate the work of public relations in this sector portrays fashion PR as a frivolous field, with references to “throwing a party.”

There are limited definitions of fashion PR. However, Noricks (2006, 48) concluded that “the role of fashion public relations is to communicate information about a client’s product or designs to various publics, usually through various media channels.” Sherman and Perlman (2010, xix) define fashion public relations as fast-paced and fluid:

> It [fashion public relations] is about 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.
In a review of six texts which made references to ‘fashion public relations’ (see Bohdanowicz & Clamp 1994; Costantino 1998; DeVries 1998; Haid, Jackson & Shaw 2006; Jackson & Shaw 2009; Lea-Greenwood 2009), the terms ‘publicity’ and ‘promotion’ were prominent when describing the function and activities of fashion PR. In addition, references to maintaining brand image, as well as communicating and building relationships between fashion organisations and publics, usually through the media, were common. Only one reference was made to two-way communication (see Bohdanowicz & Clamp 1994) and the term ‘management’ was not used to describe fashion PR. Drawing attention to the blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing, Jackson and Shaw (2009, 184) state that in addition to consumers, the main publics of fashion PR are: the fashion media, financial media, the general public, staff, the industry, government, pressure groups, and trade unions. These understandings differ from the scholarly definitions of public relations reviewed in Chapter One where public relations was, at least in mainstream approaches, defined as a management function in a corporate business practice. This understanding of public relations illustrates that fashion PR has been excluded from mainstream understandings of public relations in an effort to maintain public relations’ image as a corporate management function and drive towards professionalism. As a result, niche practices such as fashion PR remain uncommon in university courses (Noricks 2006).

Australian courses in fashion PR are rare and only offered in fashion schools rather than universities. Although not exhaustive, through my research I have identified four out of twenty institutions in Australia - Australian Institute of Creative Design (2011), The Fashion Academy (2011), The Fashion Institute (2011), and FBI Fashion
College (2011) - which include fashion PR units as a component of their fashion business courses. In contrast, fashion marketing appears to be a common unit or component of fashion courses offered across Australia. Appendix One contains a list of these courses. However, the London College of Fashion in the U.K. offers a three-year bachelor degree in fashion public relations. The course outline states:

Strategic planning, networking, problem solving, client liaison, pitching, lay-out and design, understanding the media, research skills, the fashion market, current public relations techniques, measurement and evaluation, styling, writing and presentation are essential skills covered in the course, and practical and theoretical assignments equip students with the appropriate knowledge for the fashion and lifestyle public relations industry. (London College of Fashion 2011, par. 1)

This outline highlights the dynamic nature of the fashion industry. It suggests that fashion PR practitioners need a broad spectrum of both strategic and technical skills in public relations and fashion in order to practise effectively in the fashion PR field.

*The Fashion Industry: Glamorous and Superficial*

Previous studies have explored the fashion industry from cultural (see Wilson 1985; Barnard 1996), sociological (see Simmel 1957; Blumer 1969), anthropological (see Hansen 2004), economic (see Nystrøm 1928; Sombart 1967), consumer behaviour (see O’Cass 2000), and marketing (see Bohdanowicz and Clamp 1994; Jackson and Shaw 2009; Lea-Greenwood 2009) perspectives, yet “fashion is still seen by far too many as something quintessentially frivolous” (Church Gibson 2006, 21). Movies and television series reinforce this perception. For example, *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006) portrays what it is like to be at the bottom end of the fashion food chain as an assistant to a ruthless magazine editor with endless demands. The movie highlights the usual clichés of the fashion industry: image obsessed, backstabbing
colleagues donning the latest designer-wear, extreme dieting, and glamorous boozy parties. The assistant ‘Andy’ succumbs to the criticism of her simple appearance, changing her style in the hope of gaining acceptance from her colleagues. Some fashion magazine editors, such as Charla Krupp of SHOP, Etc (quoted in Observer 25 June, 2006, par. 11), believe The Devil Wears Prada “has the nuances of the politics and the tension better than any film - and the backstabbing and sucking-up”; however, chief fashion critic at the Los Angeles Times, Booth Moore (2006, par. 3), criticised the film for portraying a “fine fashion fantasy with little to do with reality.” Sharing a similar plot to The Devil Wears Prada is U.S. television series Ugly Betty (Nelli 2006). Also depicting the usual clichés of the fashion industry, the series tells the story of ‘Betty’: an unfashionable, unattractive, but smart and kind-hearted assistant who is often degraded by her model-like, scheming colleagues. In contrast, reality docudramas such as Kell on Earth (Taylor et al. 2010), U.S. Vogue’s The September Issue (Cutler 2009) and Australia’s Marie Claire, Under the Cover (Emond 2011) offer a candid behind-the-scenes insight into the fast-paced and often highly-stressful reality of the fashion industry. Furthermore, Rhode’s book The Beauty Bias scolds fashion magazines for “endlessly magnifying the importance of appearance and the pressure to enhance it” (quoted in McCauley 2010, 10) and faults public relations for aiding this ‘beauty bias’.

The Australian Fashion Industry

The Australian fashion industry is estimated to be an AUD $14 billion industry (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade 2008), employing approximately two hundred thousand people in the textile, clothing and footwear industries (Green
Like public relations, the fashion industry is a highly feminised field with a low occupational standing (Noricks 2006). In recent times, external forces have added undue pressure on the Australian fashion Industry. Globalisation, liberalised trade agreements, the emergence of European luxury brands, the global financial crisis as well as the evolution of the Internet have required the industry to change and adapt (Kellock 2010).

Several industry events aim to promote Australian fashion both domestically and internationally. The biannual Rosemount Australian Fashion Week (RAFW) showcases more than 150 designers’ collections to an exclusive, industry-only audience of the world’s leading buyers, media and industry influencers (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade 2008; Weller 2008; RAFW 2011). Fashion trade events are held in Melbourne (Melbourne Spring Fashion Week) and from March 2012, Perth (Perth Fashion Week), showcasing collections from new and emerging local designers (City of Melbourne 2011; Perth Fashion Week 2011; Rag Trader 2011). In addition, Melbourne and Sydney host the biannual Fashion Exposed trade show where “the fashion industry meet, source and buy collections from over 1,500 diverse Australian and international brands” (Fashion Exposed 2011, par. 1).

Endeavouring to celebrate and promote the Australian fashion industry and local creative talent (Adelaide Fashion Festival 2011; Lindsay Bennett Marketing 2011; LMFF 2011; MBFF Sydney 2011; Perth Fashion Festival 2011), consumer-focused fashion festivals are held in Adelaide (Adelaide Fashion Festival), Brisbane (Mercedes-Benz Brisbane Fashion Festival), Melbourne (L’Oréal Melbourne Fashion Festival), Perth (Perth Fashion Festival) and Sydney (Mercedes-Benz Sydney Fashion Festival). The festivals feature a range of fashion shows, exhibitions,
cocktail parties and luncheons, workshops, seminars, and collection launches to embrace the Australian fashion scene. Designer Liaison of the 2011 Perth Fashion Festival, Jacqui Brown (quoted in Richards 2011, 3), suggested that behind the glamour and poise of such festivals is a dynamic, fast-paced environment.

When you watch a runway show you think it’s this really beautiful piece but behind the scenes for every model there’s at least one dresser so if it’s a 36-model show there are 36 dressers. On top of that you’ve also got hairdressers, shoe people, garment people, make-up people so at any one time there’s over 100 people back there.

However, these events serve as vital tools for public relations practitioners working in the fashion industry because “in addition to the direct reward of garment sales, participation enhances local designer reputations through increased public recognition of their names and brands, which might reasonably be expected to increase brand value and sales” (Weller 2008, 113). This observation suggests that fashion PR is perceived as a promotional tool, i.e. a ‘craft’ used to publicise designers and their brands. Furthermore, a focus on sales reinforces the overlap between public relations and marketing.

In addition, the Australian fashion industry is closely aligned with the mass circulation media that creates demand for fashion-based commodities (Ohmann 1996). The flow of information and gossip from fashion events generates the content that fills magazines, newspaper columns and television news (Weller 2008). For example, in 2005 Australian Fashion Week generated AUD $12.5 million in domestic media coverage and AUD $7.5 million in international coverage (Breen-Burns 2005). Therefore, building and maintaining relationships with the media is a vital activity for fashion PR practitioners looking to secure media coverage for their clients. A review of the literature (see Bohdanowicz & Clamp 1994; Costantino
1998; DeVries 1998; Haid, Jackson & Shaw 2006; Noricks 2006; Jackson & Shaw 2009; Lea-Greenwood 2009; Sherman & Perlman 2010) on fashion PR reinforces the dominance of media relations in the field. Jackson and Shaw (2009, 187) suggest this dominance is due to the reciprocal relationship between fashion brands and the media: “Journalists need fashion stories, editorials, features and products to include in their magazines or other media to satisfy readers’ fashion interests. Similarly, fashion PRs need media coverage to communicate with their brands’ consumers.”

The authors suggest the relationship between fashion PR practitioner and editor is “symbiotic” where each is likely to benefit from the other. In their book *Fashion Public Relations*, Sherman and Perlman (2010, 231) refer to the relationship between PR and the media as a business relationship: “An association between two people or different companies who reach a level of comfort, and who cooperate by sharing assistance, information, and logistics to achieve a common goal that benefits both parties.” This portrayal of the fashion PR-media relationship is analogous to J. Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model. Despite this, the dominance of media relations in the activities of fashion PR practitioners has arguably contributed to the relegation of fashion PR to a ‘craft’ practice.

However, Borges (quoted in Kurutz 2011) states that in an age of information, fashion PR practitioners must not only build relationships with fashion editors, but also fashion bloggers. Fashion bloggers, particularly the female blogging community, have changed public relations practices, becoming one of the most powerful ‘fashion influencers’, shaping brands and essentially defining what’s on-trend (Dalto 2010). Yet Jacob (quoted in Griffith 2011, 3) claims public relations practitioners “are still learning to treat bloggers as more than an easy PR hit.”
strong presence of fashion bloggers at the 2011 Perth Fashion Festival illustrates how influential blogging has become. Perth Fashion Festival director Mariella Harvey-Hanrahan (quoted in Westlake 2011, 26) said, “bloggers are a valuable and powerful tool in helping PFF [Perth Fashion Festival] spread the word about Western Australia’s amazing creative industry.”

Strategic Communication

Noricks (2006) and Sherman and Perlman (2010) point out that communicating strategically is vital to succeed in the world of fashion. The importance of a strategic approach in fashion can be traced back to Edward Bernays’ Lucky Strike Cigarettes campaign in the 1920s. Known as the ‘Father of PR’, Bernays used strategy to promote green - the colour of Lucky Strike cigarette packaging - as fashionable for women (Coombs 2005). As discussed in Chapter One, planning is one of the characteristics of strategic communication. Literature on fashion PR suggests planning ensures a successful fashion campaign. Sherman and Perlman (2010, 93) commented that

a properly planned and implemented public relations campaign typically leads to significantly improved results when compared to an unplanned project that is put together at the last moment with little to no research or thought.

Noricks (2006) and DeVries (1998) suggest fashion PR practitioners should be working from quarterly to year-long plans. In addition, DeVries (1998) discusses the importance of fashion PR practitioners working in accordance with the fashion calendar - an annual schedule detailing an agreed set of dates for fashion weeks, publication lead times and seasonal periods (Haid, Jackson & Shaw 2006; Jackson & Shaw 2009). “The national fashion magazines that cover the industry often work
three months in advance, requiring the fashion PR pro to be at least two months ahead of them,” DeVries (1998, 14) explains.

Research is considered paramount to the planning stage of strategic communication in fashion PR (DeVries 1998; Noricks 2006, 2010; Sherman and Perlman 2010). DeVries (1998) and Noricks (2006, 2010) outline the need for fashion PR practitioners to stay abreast of industry trends. Noricks (2010) suggests collecting data relevant to consumer purchasing behaviour as well as information on emerging trends help determine a campaign’s target public. DeVries (1998, 14) acknowledges the need for practitioners to understand fashion:

Fashion is perhaps the most fast-moving and image conscious of any industry marketing to consumers. . . . To be successful at fashion public relations, practitioners must be immersed in the fashion culture, its daily shifts and changes, its attitudes and social life.

As discussed in Chapter One, public relations scholars also define evaluation as an element of strategic communication. Noricks’ (2006, 58) work concluded that “further research is needed to determine if and how fashion public relations practitioners engage in evaluation.” Labelling the evaluation stage of a fashion campaign as a “challenging task”, Sherman and Perlman (2010, 287) state that “returns from public relations initiatives are difficult to quantify because the fashion company’s public image is not a solid object or item. We cannot count the number of positive public opinions about the fashion company.”

The use of strategic communication in the fashion industry is illustrated through Swann’s (2010) case study on Payless ShoeSource’s brand repositioning exercise. After the U.S. retailer’s consumer research revealed customers wanted not only
affordable, but also on-trend fashions, the company implemented a four-year campaign (2001-2004) to create a new brand personality. The new strategy focused on fashion influencers, including the fashion media, fashion events, celebrity endorsement, and the designer community. The fashion media were seen as a dominant fashion influencer “helping women decide what to wear and where to buy each season” (Swann 2010, 170). In the implementation stage of the campaign, media pitching, Payless showroom events and celebrity endorsement (although not a high priority) were used to gain publicity for the brand. The evaluation stage of the campaign estimated that in 2004, the public relations efforts resulted in 826 media mentions and an estimated USD $6.4 million in advertising equivalent value (AVEs)\(^1\). In the case of the Payless example, fashion PR was strategic in the sense that it used research to develop a clear strategy to fulfill objectives, and evaluated the campaign outcomes.

Strategic communication contrasts with the one-way ‘craft’ approach often associated with fashion PR. Relegating fashion PR to a ‘craft’ has contributed to the low status of the fashion PR specialty, excluding it from mainstream understandings of public relations as a management function and corporate activity. Costantino (1998) suggests the use of strategic communication in fashion PR denounces the field’s ‘glamorous’ stereotype. She argues that communicating strategically requires the work of fashion PR practitioners to be continuous and carefully organised, drawing on in-depth knowledge of the entire fashion market in order to create understanding through communication practices. As noted in Chapter One, the use of

\(^1\) Although a commonly used method for measuring the value of public relations activity, the public relations industry, including the PRIA, consider AVEs to be unethical and do not recognise AVEs as a reliable or valid method of evaluation (Macnamara 2006; O’Dwyer 2010).
strategic communication in public relations campaigns also aims to differentiate the field from marketing.

*Fashion PR and Marketing*

Fashion industry books generally describe fashion PR as a support function of marketing. In line with the fourth ‘P’ of the marketing mix, discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, Lea-Greenwood (2009) and Sherman and Perlman (2010) label fashion public relations as a method of promotion. Haid, Jackson and Shaw (2006) and Jackson and Shaw (2009) present fashion public relations as a communication tool used to achieve overall marketing objectives. Confirming the weak boundaries between public relations and marketing, Bohdanowicz and Clamp (1994) and Costantino (1998) argue that there is a clear distinction between fashion PR and fashion marketing, but fashion PR should still function to support the whole marketing effort. Evidently, marketing is clearly recognised in association with the fashion industry; the role of public relations is ambiguous and, in comparison to marketing, poorly defined.

The use of social media in fashion PR practices further exposes the overlap between public relations and marketing. Social media, also referred to as user-generated media, describes new online information sources that are created, circulated and encourage greater participation and interaction by users (Mangold & Faulds 2009). New media applications include word-of-mouth forums such as blogs and discussion boards, podcasting, and social networking sites (Fitch 2009; Mangold & Faulds 2009). These applications have transformed the public relations landscape, disturbing
traditional practices and understandings of public relations and exposing an overlap between public relations and marketing.

The fashion industry was late to adopt social media; some companies ignored the trend, while others used it only for sales and promotional purposes (Wright 2009). However, Imran Amed (2011, par. 2), founder and editor of BusinessofFashion.com believes the fashion industry now realises the importance of having an online presence and helping “clients manage the new, constantly changing paradigm of digital fashion communications.” Macala Wright, founder and publisher of FashionablyMarketing.Me (2009, par. 1) agrees, stating: “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.”

Hitha Prabhakar (2010), founder of retail consulting firm the Style File Group, believes the fashion industry is capitalising on the more than eight hundred million Facebook (Facebook 2011; Ostrow 2011) and more than one hundred million Twitter users2 (Peters 2011). Prabhakar (2010) claims the use of social media has enabled fashion labels to connect to new and broader audiences, providing publicity that an advertising budget simply cannot buy.

The positions of Wright (2009) and Prabhakar (2010) reflect the tensions between public relations and marketing roles in the fashion industry’s use of social media. Wright (2009) suggests social media is inherently a marketing function, contributing to “sales” and increasing “customer bases.” In contrast Prabhakar (2010) implies

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2 Figures as at November 2011
social media is used to reach “new and broader audiences” resulting in “publicity,” both of which are characteristics of public relations practices. Comparing the views of Wright (2009) and Prabhakar (2010) suggests that fashion PR’s use of social media has resulted in a convergence of public relations and marketing roles.

Social media enables one person to communicate messages with hundreds or thousands of other consumers in a matter of minutes (Mangold & Faulds 2009). U.S. fashion designer Marc Jacobs illustrated this point through Twitter, using the social networking site to find a new head of social media and ‘tweeter’ (Lee & Tadros 2011). On February 15, 2011, Marc Jacobs released the following job advertisement through his Twitter account:

No resumes. No cover letters. Were [sic] not interested. Your tweets are the only qualification were [sic] interested in. All you have to do is give @MarcJacobsIntl a winning tweet. Be clear. Smart. Understand our DNA. Say it in one tweet! That is your interview!

R. Larson (2009), suggests that social media has shifted the balance of power into the hands of the consumer, enabling them to connect with, and draw power from, one another. Social media’s amplification of consumer-to-consumer power was illustrated through a Facebook campaign initiated by a devotee of fashion chain General Pants Co. Lee Gesmundo launched the Facebook group ‘Bring General Pants Co to Perth’, attracting hundreds of members. As a result, the General Pants head office contacted Gesmundo to inform him that they were opening a Perth City General Pants and to offer him an ongoing role within the company (Williams 2011). In this example, the fashion retailer had more than just an online presence; it used social media to engage with its consumers. However, this approach is not uniform across the fashion industry. Macnamara (2010) states that some public relations
organisations are attempting to engage in interactive sites using one-way communication, particularly for marketing and brand promotion purposes. Similarly, Greenhill (2011, par. 12) argues that fashion brands suffer from “paper pixel syndrome”, taking media developed and produced for traditional deployment and forcing it onto their new media platforms. As a result, the viral capabilities of social media do not always work in favour of fashion retailers.

In September 2011, Gasp Jeans dominated social media discussions after an email sent from the brand’s management team in reply to a complaint from an offended customer went viral. Keara O’Neil emailed Gasp management after an encounter with a sales assistant at the brand’s Chapel Street store in Melbourne. In her email, O’Neil detailed the male assistant’s inappropriate comments about her appearance (Haddow 2011; Sholl 2011). Rather than receiving an apology from management, O’Neil was sent a mistake-ridden response, supporting the actions of the sales assistant. The email suggested that O’Neil was an “undesirable” time-waster, stating “If you would like to do us any favours, please do not waste our retail staff’s time, because as you have already seen, they will not tolerate it” (quoted in Sholl 2011, par. 8-9). The email 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 is now promoting their public relations mishap in the view that ‘any publicity is good publicity’ (Sholl 2011, par. 13), stating that although the email response was not a publicity stunt, the retailer was thrilled with the attention. Gasp spokesperson Matthew Chidgey (quoted in Cooper 2011, par. 14-15) said of O’Neil, “Our shops are packed, everyone knows us now and I
can’t thank her enough for what she did for us.” However, Adam Ferrier, consumer psychologist and founding partner of Naked Communications, commented on the *Gruen Planet* (Anderson 2011) television series that Chidgey’s response was a common, but poorly executed strategy.

He is trying to create an in-group - the Gasp consumer - and an out-group - everybody else…what you’re meant to do is talk up the in-group and ignore everybody else. He is talking down the out-group, disparaging us and not saying a word about the Gasp consumer.

Ferrier added, “This brand is dead. This brand won’t exist I don’t think in about a year’s time.” The Gasp example illustrates how social media has transformed the fashion PR landscape by putting more communication power in the hands of the consumer, enabling them to have a direct influence on the image of a brand.

The Witchery ‘Man in the Jacket’ campaign reiterates the perception of fashion PR as a ‘craft’ practice closely aligned with marketing and promotion. The Australian fashion retailer’s publicity exercise was created by Naked Communications to launch the label’s new menswear collection. 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 sixty thousand views on YouTube after gaining the attention of the mainstream media (Macnamara 2010). Experts estimated the campaign received over AUD $8 million in free publicity (Bishops 2009). After surveying one thousand men aged between 28 and 35 a week following the stunt, Naked Communications concluded the campaign to be a “social media success” (Mumbrella 2009a, par. 2). Key findings suggested 47 percent of those surveyed were likely or very likely to visit a Witchery Man store, more than half said they were more positive about the brand, and 40 percent found the campaign to be light-hearted and entertaining.
Witchery’s CEO Iain Naim (quoted in Mumbrella 2009b, par. 18) stated that he was “very pleased” with the outcome. However, Australian social monitoring service Streamwall labelled the hoax as a “viral failure” (quoted in Mumbrella 2009a, par. 1), suggesting that if the campaign was successful, it was only as a public relations strategy rather than through social media engagement. The ‘Man in the Jacket’ campaign reinforces the possible convergence of public relations and marketing roles when using social media in the fashion industry. It is apparent that this campaign aimed to satisfy both disciplines: to increase sales (marketing) and brand recognition (public relations). In addition, The Witchery campaign also raises questions as to whether fashion PR is embracing the opportunity social media provides to meaningfully engage with fashion publics, or simply to ensure an online presence.

This issue is also raised in a brand repositioning exercise by an Australian clothing discounter. In order 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 a girl called 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. Viewer comments on Australia’s media and marketing website Mumbrella (2011) criticise the campaign for the contrived persona created and the lack of authenticity resulting from ‘friends’ posts on Zoe’s Facebook profile. DFO’s campaign illustrates the impact of social media on traditional public relations practices. Although the campaign demonstrates that DFO is embracing new methods to reach fashion publics, employing an interactive platform such as Facebook does
not automatically imply the company is ‘engaging’ with its target audience.

However, because this campaign was recently implemented it is difficult to evaluate its success.

In this chapter, I examined public relations in a particular sector, the Australian fashion industry, in order to investigate a public relations practice that has received little academic attention from public relations scholars. Chapter Two challenged stereotypes about the glamour and frivolity of the fashion industry, suggesting public relations in this environment is dynamic, fast-paced and embraces both creative (i.e. ‘craft’) and strategic (i.e. ‘professional’) practices. Despite this, fashion PR is perceived as a ‘craft’ practice aligned to marketing, promotion and publicity. The perception of fashion PR as a ‘craft’ has led public relations scholars to ignore this particular public relations specialty in mainstream understandings of public relations. This marginalisation of fashion PR supports the need for public relations to be studied according to the day-to-day activities carried out by practitioners (see Abbott 1988) in order to acknowledge the diversity of practitioner experiences in public relations fields. In addition, the social media examples reinforce the blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing explored in Chapter One of this thesis. The case studies suggest a convergence of public relations and marketing roles when social media is used in the fashion industry. In addition, they demonstrate that the fashion industry is not yet embracing the potential social media offers to engage with fashion publics and fashion consumers. Chapters Four and Five will investigate whether the fashion PR specialty is using social media to effectively engage with publics. In the next chapter, I establish the value of qualitative research
in understanding the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry and briefly outline the research design for this thesis.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, I introduced fashion PR and the Australian fashion industry in order to provide the context in which this research takes place. I challenged the glamorous perception of the fashion industry and established that fashion PR has been relegated to a ‘craft’ practice due to its association with marketing, promotion and publicity. This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used to gain insight into public relations in a niche environment. It aims to establish the value of qualitative research in understanding the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry, while providing a transparent overview of the steps taken to gather data. Adopting the principles of constructionism (Crotty 1998), this research endeavours to produce original findings through engagement and interaction with fashion PR practitioners. Using an ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews to achieve this, I immersed myself in the Australian fashion industry to gain an in-depth understanding of the field from the perspective of practitioners. This research project was granted ethics approval by the Murdoch University Research Ethics Office (Project No. 2011/074). This chapter begins by justifying the use of qualitative research in this study, before detailing a step-by-step discussion of the ethnographic inquiry, and the interview process. Finally, the limitations of this research are declared.

Qualitative Vs Quantitative Research

Morton and Lin (1995) observe that public relations academic articles using quantitative research are more common than those using qualitative approaches.
Although there are benefits of quantitative research, namely, its lack of intrusion on participants, its capacity to deliver quick outcomes, and its ability to make generalisations (Baxter & Babbie 2003), it often fails to provide an in-depth and candid insight of the group under study (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). “Quantitative research in public relations is thus generally described as confirmatory research” (Johnston & Zawawi 2009, 151). In line with the work of Abbott (1988), this research project will employ a qualitative approach to understanding fashion PR in terms of the day-to-day activities of fashion PR practitioners, rather than interpreting the fashion PR specialty through mainstream understandings of what constitutes professionalism in public relations. By using a qualitative research approach, this research seeks to “understand the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live and work in it” (Daymon & Holloway 2002, 12).

*Ethnographic Inquiry*

The ethnographic study took place in Perth at an in-house public relations and events department of a national retail organisation. The researcher worked two days a week on an unpaid basis between February and August 2011. Participant observation was used to capture the ethnographic data. I undertook the ‘participate-as-observer’ role (Daymon & Holloway 2002), disclosing my purpose to the group under study and fully immersing myself in their day-to-day activities (Creswell 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). Informed by the principles of symbolic interactionism (see Blumer 1973), this interpretive and naturalist approach offered a candid, yet critical insight into the perceptions, values and attitudes, routine activities, interactions and experiences of fashion PR practitioners (Creswell 1994; Crotty 1998; Daymon &
These observations were recorded as keywords and phrases throughout the day, which were then written up in a journal as more formal descriptions and personal reflections.

The process of developing coding categories was ongoing throughout the ethnographic observations. Field notes were analysed each week, drawing links to existing literature and noting heuristic themes and concepts. Once the data collection process was complete, field notes were read holistically to ensure I was intimately familiar with the observations. New themes emerged, adding to those I had previously conceptualised in my field notes. The field notes were then analysed for dominant themes and concepts. These findings are presented in Chapter Four. As qualitative research is inherently multi-method in focus (Flick 2002; Denzin & Lincoln 2005), semi-structured interviews with fashion PR practitioners were also conducted.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants selected using a purposive sampling method. A semi-structured framework was chosen for its degree of flexibility to add, drop or ask follow-up questions and allow the conversation to naturally flow in the direction the participant felt important to discuss (Daymon & Holloway 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006). This approach maximised the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the fashion PR specialty from the perspective of the practitioners. In line with Bingham and Moore’s (1959, 271) “conversation with a purpose”, a conversational style of interview was adopted. This
approach ensured a comfortable atmosphere for participants, while still enabling the researcher to drive the interview by asking a range of open-ended questions about experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge and background (Patton 2002; Daymon & Holloway 2002).

Interviews were conducted in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, to prevent geographical bias, from June to August 2011. Potential interviewees were identified using Internet searches as well as through contacts the researcher had developed in both the ethnographic study and a casual job in fashion retail. A mixture of practitioners working in-house for a fashion brand or designer, and those working with several fashion clients in a public relations agency were sought. Ten potential participants were initially contacted via email. A detailed information letter on the research project was attached to the email stating that participation was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Of the ten practitioners contacted, a total of six agreed to be interviewed. Two in Melbourne (one via email), three in Sydney (one via email) and one in Perth. All participants have a public relations role in the fashion sector and possess higher education qualifications in the areas of fashion, marketing, public relations and communications.

Three of the four face-to-face interviews took place at the practitioners’ place of business; the fourth was conducted at a café next door to the practitioner’s office. Prior to commencing the interview, participants were given a consent form outlining the details of the research project. This consent form was signed once they fully understood the purpose of the study and agreed to voluntarily participate. After participants confirmed they were happy for the interview to be audio-recorded, I
began by giving them some background information about myself and briefly summarised the purpose of the research before beginning to elicit responses from approximately twenty questions. The interview question guide is included as Appendix Two. These questions were drawn from the work of Noricks (2006), who studied the fashion PR specialty in the U.S. However, the questions were adapted to suit the purpose of this thesis.

During the transcription process, research participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Details of the research participants are summarised in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>In-house Vs Agency Roles</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Marketing and Publicity Manager</td>
<td>In-house, international luxury women’s wear retailer</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>Fashion, Lifestyle &amp; Events PR Agency</td>
<td>Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlyn</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Fashion &amp; Lifestyle PR Agency</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Fashion PR Agency</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Fashion, Beauty &amp; Lifestyle PR Agency</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flynn</td>
<td>Brand Manager</td>
<td>In-house, local designer</td>
<td>Perth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each interview was listened to three times to prevent premature analysis of the data and ensure critical reflection. A transcript was provided to the interviewee within approximately one month of the interview, giving participants the opportunity to withdraw from the research project, amend and/or approve the material.

Open and pattern coding was used to analyse the data. Meaning was extracted from the findings through a grounded theory approach (see Glaser & Strauss 1967) of
analysis whereby patterns, ideas and common keywords emerged directly from the participants’ responses (Strauss & Corbin 2008). This data was then organised according to common themes, which are presented in Chapter Five. As both ethnography and interviews have their own limitations, particularly in the subjectivity of the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983; Creswell 1994), for the former and a lack of critical reflection (Atkinson & Silverman 1997) for the latter, the ethnographic findings and interview findings were triangulated. This triangulation ensures both an ‘etic’ - the outsider’s perspective and ‘emic’ - the insider’s perspective, of the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry is provided (Fetterman 1989).

### Research Limitations

Limitations were apparent throughout the study which could have affected the findings and interpretations of this research. Firstly, five out of the six participants were women. However, this sample reinforces the female dominance of the fashion industry and the public relations industry. The overrepresentation of public relations agency practitioners must be acknowledged, as well as the dominance of perspectives from fashion PR practitioners in Sydney.

The purposive sampling method used in the semi-structured interviews questions the ability to generalise findings. However, this research attempts to provide detailed and rich information about fashion PR from the perspective of practitioners. In this sense, a small, information-rich purposive sample could be seen as an enhancement to the study as a large sample could potentially harm the depth and richness of the findings.
(Daymon & Holloway 2002; L. Grunig 2008). Nonetheless, the low participation rate, as well as the two interviews completed via email, could have impacted on the breadth of knowledge and insight gained. Finally, the subjectivity of the researcher must be acknowledged as the researcher has worked part-time in the fashion industry for five years in a retail capacity.

This chapter provided an overview of the ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews used to gather data for this research project. It aimed to establish the value of qualitative research in providing a richer and detailed understanding of the fashion PR specialty. This chapter established that a multi-method qualitative research design maximises the opportunity to provide an original and meaningful insight into public relations in the Australian fashion industry by focusing on the perceptions of practitioners. The analysis of these perceptions will contribute to the development of new theoretical understandings of public relations. In the next chapter, I report and discuss the findings of the ethnographic study.
CHAPTER FOUR
ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

In the previous chapter I established the value of qualitative research in investigating the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. I established the benefits of qualitative research in providing richer meaning and detail than quantitative data-gathering methods. In this chapter, I report and discuss the findings of the ethnographic inquiry. The ethnography was conducted in the Perth-based PR and events department of a national retail organisation. The department is a one-person team led by a PR and events manager. The manager is responsible for PR and events in two states from a Perth base. The researcher worked as an assistant to the manager, fulfilling a range of duties including, but not limited to: writing media releases and pitching to the media; organising PR loans, whereby clothing is lent to editors and stylists for photoshoots and editorial opportunities; liaising with service providers, suppliers, and consumer publics; planning and managing events; and scanning media publications for news clippings. Through a discussion of the ethnographic findings, this chapter aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. Drawing on the researcher’s observations and experiences, mainstream perspectives of public relations are challenged, informing new ways of understanding public relations. This chapter begins by discussing the researcher’s observations on the role of public relations in the organisation, before reviewing the PR and events department’s relationship to marketing through the organisation’s use of social media. Finally, observations of specific fashion PR practices are analysed.
Fashion PR: Behind the Scenes

Through an analysis of my observations, it emerged that the role of public relations in the organisation is to contribute to, and boost sales by, promoting the retailer and its brands. This promotion is achieved primarily through communicating information about the retailer through media relations, used to secure free publicity in the form of editorials; consumer-focused events; and celebrity endorsement. However, a conversation with the PR and events manager revealed that the PR department is not well received by other departments, including the retailer’s management team. She suggested there is a lack of understanding regarding the function of the public relations department within the organisation. The manager remarked that her job title changes according to what the organisation believes will be received the best; her title has changed over the course of her employment from ‘publicity manager’ to ‘promotions manager’ to its current title of ‘PR and events manager’. She explained that she terminated her membership to the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) as it fails to provide any training or professional development programs for her specialty. In addition, the PR and events manager suggested that university courses teach a ‘one-fits-all-approach’ to practising public relations, often with a heavy focus on corporate and government sectors. She commented that public relations practices outside of these sectors are considered to be ‘fluff’. This conversation suggests the low status of the fashion PR specialty within public relations may be a consequence of its exclusion from mainstream theories and understandings of public relations due to its non-corporate, non-managerial nature.

Although fashion PR is often considered a glamorous field, many mundane tasks were performed during my time at the organisation. Repetitive duties included
preparing spreadsheets for clothing and accessories used in editorials, fashion
parades, events and photoshoots; updating media contact listings; script writing for
MCs and public announcements; managing incoming and outgoing PR loans;
 invoicing; organising dry-cleaning; and steaming stock. On my first day of unpaid
work at the organisation, I recorded in my field notes:

Far from glamour - it is hard work with a lot of administration, tedious and time-
consuming duties to attend to. I think people have this image of fashion PR
practitioners looking like fashionistas all the time. This is not the case! So much
running around demanded flat shoes!

In addition, numerous references in my field notes were made to long hours, busy
days, skipped lunch breaks and the emergence of ad hoc duties. These observations
challenge the notion of fashion PR as a glamorous field.

Public Relations and Marketing

The PR and events department of the organisation is considered to be a subset of the
‘marketing and brand development’ division. This division encompasses the
organisation’s advertising, visual merchandising and PR and events departments.
The retailer’s head office is located in Melbourne. This office is responsible for
handling the retailer’s marketing and brand development nationally and is therefore
referred to as ‘national’. State-based PR and events teams exist in Sydney, Brisbane
and Perth, which handle public relations exclusively in their state. However, the PR
and events team in Perth is also responsible for Adelaide. These state-based
departments are answerable to managers belonging to not only PR and events, but
also to the national marketing division. In addition, the PR and events department is
not responsible for corporate communications, which is managed by the human
resources team. No interaction between corporate communications and the Perth PR and events team was observed; however, it is not known if the national office has a relationship with corporate communications.

The organisation’s use of public relations as a promotional tool to drive sales likens the PR and events department to the fourth ‘P’ (promotion) of the marketing mix. This understanding of public relations illustrates the blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing discussed in Chapter One, and more specifically, the notion of fashion PR as part of the ‘marketing mix’ identified in Chapter Two. The lack of distinction between the two fields was reinforced when I assisted on a photoshoot featuring the retailer’s exclusive brands. The PR and events manager informed me that the aim is to promote your product to your audience and entice them to purchase what the model is wearing.

The organisation’s use of social media further illustrates the overlap between public relations and marketing. Social media is a relatively new platform adopted by the organisation and has only been used since May 2011. The retailer has a Facebook page, which is managed by the national team. The organisation’s Facebook profile is used as a form of brand promotion, containing fashion-focused information including behind-the-scenes content from photoshoots, interviews with brand ambassadors and designers, in-store appearances and events, as well as current specials on offer. The PR and events manager in Perth uses her personal Facebook profile to update interstate colleagues on the progress of events by uploading pictures. Her Facebook profile is also used in a professional context for networking opportunities. She does not have access to post on, or use, the organisation’s official Facebook site. In
addition, a blog is used to promote the retailer’s latest fashions and events; however, the national office dictates the content of blog posts. Nonetheless, the state-based PR and events manager is a proactive user of social media. Social networking sites, blogs and local newspaper websites 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 challenges and limitations of promoting the organisation through centrally managed social media platforms emerged when I was asked to edit a blog post on a Perth-based designer. I recorded in my field notes:

The post contained incorrect information and didn’t give 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 reinforces Greenhill’s (2011) “paper pixel syndrome” presented in Chapter Two, whereby content developed and produced for traditional media is forced onto new media platforms without any adaption. In addition, the impact social media has on the ability of fashion PR practitioners to maintain control over communication campaigns was evident when one of the retailer’s models ‘tweeted’ the confidential location of a photoshoot, breaking the embargoed story to the news media.

An analysis of my observations on the PR and events department’s use of social media reinforces the blurring of the boundaries between public relations and marketing. Akin to the DFO example presented in Chapter Two, the retailer’s use of social media illustrates that the fashion industry is embracing new methods to reach
fashion publics; however, there is no evidence of the retailer using social media to actively engage with consumer publics. Rather, communication was outbound and used predominantly for promotional purposes. This promotional use of social media corresponds with the findings of Macnamara (2010) presented in Chapter Two and challenges the arguments of public relations scholars presented in Chapter One, which suggest that public relations utilises two-way methods, as opposed to unilateral marketing practices. This observation suggests a possible convergence between public relations and marketing roles in the use of social media in the fashion industry.

The tensions between public relations and marketing were further displayed through the PR and events team’s close relationship with consumer publics. I observed the organisation-consumer relationship to be maintained through social media, email and mail correspondence, as well as consumer-focused events. Prior to two events, to which the retailer’s top spending customers were invited, I personally telephoned the guests to confirm they had received their invitations. The PR and events manager reiterated the importance of interacting with these customers at functions. Such gestures and interactions encouraged positive feedback by way of email, which was used as part of the evaluation process to measure the success of events. These observations demonstrate the importance of consumers in the fashion PR specialty, further alluding to a convergence of public relations and marketing roles in the fashion industry.
**Relationship Management**

Managing relationships was observed as a dominant function of the PR and events department. A ‘give-and-take’ approach was used to maintain relationships with modelling agencies, stylists, hairdressers, make-up artists, local designers, stage and lighting suppliers, hire companies, drycleaners, transport companies, and catering suppliers. In addition, media relations was observed as a significant activity performed by the PR and events team to secure publicity for the retailer. Writing press releases, scheduling media interviews and photo opportunities for brand ambassadors and designers, pitching story ideas to the media, organising PR loans, providing credits for clothing and products used in editorials and photoshoots, and, ultimately, promoting the retailer’s brands to fashion editors occurred on a daily basis. Knowing what publication fashion editors are aligned to, and being familiar with their work, was observed as an important element when pitching stories. The organisation’s use of media relations suggests that publicity and promotion are prominent functions of fashion PR and supports Chapter Two’s findings, which found the terms ‘publicity’ and ‘promotion’ to be prominent when describing the function of fashion PR (Bohdanowicz & Clamp 1994; Costantino 1998; DeVries 1998; Haid, Jackson & Shaw 2006; Jackson & Shaw 2009; Lea-Greenwood 2009). Furthermore, it illustrates fashion PR’s marginalisation from mainstream understandings of public relations.

The PR loans played a particularly important role in the organisation’s relationship with the media. The PR and events manager commented that they are a good way of forming reciprocal relationships with fashion editors because you are doing them a favour by lending them product; therefore in return when you need something
published, they endeavour to do it for you. Although the notion of ‘reciprocal relationships’ suggests similarities to J. Grunig and Hunt’s Excellence Theory (see Chapter One), I do not believe this practice demonstrates two-way symmetrical communication as both parties only altered their practices to maintain “business as usual” (Roper 2009, 82). The editorial process reinforces the difficulty in achieving reciprocal relationships in the fashion PR sector. The PR and events manager reiterated that she has no control over what fashion editors decide to publish, despite her efforts to push particular stories. I experienced this during the placement. After spending hours putting outfits together for a publication a fashion editor was working on, the editor chose to photograph pieces she had selected earlier.

The use of media relations by the organisation’s PR and events department confirms the prominence of media relations in fashion PR, as established in Chapter Two. If we consider Grunig and Hunt’s ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ continuum discussed in Chapter One, the dominance of media relations in the activities of public relations practitioners in the Australian fashion industry relegates fashion PR to a ‘craft’. However, my observations suggest that securing media placements requires ‘professional’ skills, articulated through strategic communication.

*Strategic Communication*

Chapter One discusses the use of strategic communication within public relations in terms of planning, implementation and evaluation. The importance of planning in strategic communication was observed throughout the ethnographic inquiry. Weekly work-in-progress, or ‘WIP’, meetings were held via a telephone conference between
all state teams to discuss strategies, plans, budgets, schedules and upcoming events. In addition, working ‘in sync’ with editorial deadlines was of paramount importance to the PR and events team. An example I noted was scheduling media coverage for the retailer’s Spring/Summer launch three months in advance. This observation confirms the importance of strategic planning in fashion PR (DeVries 1998; Noricks 2006; Sherman and Perlman 2010) discussed in Chapter Two. However, I noted a conversation in my journal with the PR and events manager about implementing strategies. She stated that strategies and plans taught at university are not practical in her field. The manager added that practitioners working in fashion PR do not have the time to formulate comprehensive public relations strategies and suggested that public relations in the fashion industry requires day-to-day and ad hoc planning. This reactive behaviour was confirmed when I had to make last minute pitches to the media to gain additional publicity for a campaign. These findings identify a gap between public relations practice and textbook learning and reinforce the work of Abbott (1988), who suggests that public relations needs to be studied as it is practised day-to-day rather than how it is defined in normative theory.

Chapter Two confirmed that research, particularly keeping abreast of industry trends, is integral to the planning stage of strategic communication in fashion PR. The organisation’s PR and events team kept up-to-date with industry news and trends through publications including: the *West Australian*, the *West Weekend*, the *Sunday Times*, the *STM, Habitat, iShoperth, Scoop Magazine, Fashion Journal, Candy Magazine, Sheila Magazine*, and online websites including *Rag Trader, the Fashion Catalyst* and the *Social Diary*. In addition, my field notes made several references to
the importance of fashion PR practitioners immersing themselves in the fashion culture. On one occasion, I commented in my journal:

Co-ordinating outfits for editorials, photoshoots, and events demands creativity and knowledge about what’s ‘in-fashion’. No fashion editor will publish a photoshoot that isn’t promoting on-trend looks, no matter how organised and seamless the photoshoot runs. Like a stockbroker needs to know the stock market, a fashion PR practitioner needs to know fashion!

This journal entry reveals fashion as a dynamic environment; to practise fashion PR effectively, the practitioner must stay ahead of fashion trends, changes and shifts. It illustrates that fashion PR practitioners need to be adept in more than just public relations.

I established the difficulty in evaluating fashion PR (Sherman & Perlman 2010) in Chapter Two. Monitoring media clippings was a common evaluation method used by the organisation. In addition, evaluation reports were frequently used to measure the success of events. The reports included media coverage and public feedback, as well as an overview of the event in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. However, the PR and events manager commented that this stage is often neglected due to lack of time. It was also observed that in-store events held as part of communication campaigns used footfall counts and profit gains to evaluate the success of the event. The PR and events manager commented that ultimately, the aim of in-store events is to entice the public to spend, reiterating the notion of fashion PR functioning to support marketing objectives.

The organisation’s use of strategic communication, arguably ‘professional’ communication, contrasts with the one-way ‘craft’ approach often associated with fashion PR. My observations illustrate fashion PR practitioners use industry-based
research, strategic planning, and reactive behaviour to ensure a successfully executed fashion campaign. In support of Costantino (1998), to an extent this observation denounces fashion PR’s glamorous stereotype. However, public relations’ association with promotional culture, particularly through celebrity endorsement, ensures fashion PR continues to be perceived as superficial.

**Celebrity Endorsement**

Celebrity endorsement was observed as a common promotional and publicity tactic used by the organisation’s PR and events department. Local socialites, media personalities and brand ambassadors are used for in-house and external fashion events, photoshoots, and media opportunities. The PR and events manager discussed previous events which had used international celebrities to host in-store events. The benefits of celebrity endorsement in generating profits and publicity were noted. For example, a re-launch event celebrating the refurbishment of one of the retailer’s stores featured a guest appearance by a brand ambassador. This event attracted fifteen thousand people (as per footfall count) to the store as well as extensive media coverage. In addition, an exclusive photoshoot of a brand ambassador was the number one story featured on the homepage of the online publication of a major newspaper. J. Grunig and Hunt’s ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ continuum would consider celebrity endorsement as a ‘craft’, functioning to gain publicity. However my observations revealed that securing celebrity endorsers requires skill in negotiation as well as relationship building and maintenance. In addition, the choice of celebrity reinforces the broader public relations strategy and organisational values in the campaign. It can therefore be argued that fashion PR’s use of celebrity
endorsement functions strategically to appeal to and entice publics to purchase the products being endorsed.

The use of ethnography as a research tool in this thesis has contributed to a deeper understanding of the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry from the observations and experiences of the researcher. The analysis of ethnographic observations reinforces the tensions between public relations and marketing presented throughout this thesis. The observations suggest a convergence of public relations and marketing roles when social media is used in the fashion PR specialty. The observations illustrate that fashion PR is not practised in a way consistent with J. Grunig and Hunt’s dominant paradigm, which has relegated fashion PR to a ‘craft’ due to its association with marketing, promotion and publicity. However, the findings challenge current mainstream understandings, which fail to consider the heterogeneous nature of public relations practices. This chapter demonstrates that the theoretical gap between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices cannot be sustained, as fashion PR practitioners rely on both ‘craft’ (i.e. media relations, celebrity endorsement) and ‘professional’ (i.e. strategic communication) in their work. However, to some extent, all of these practices are strategic in that they are informed by research, carefully planned to meet certain organisational objectives, and position current fashion and the organisation in ways that are relevant for different stakeholders. However, inconsistencies in evaluation processes were observed. Overall, the analysis of ethnographic findings suggests the dominant paradigm is not an adequate conceptual model for understanding the practice of fashion PR. In the next chapter, I report and discuss the findings of the interviews conducted with
public relations practitioners working in the Australian fashion industry, in order to develop new theoretical insights for understanding public relations.
CHAPTER FIVE
INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In the previous chapter, I reported and discussed the observations of my ethnographic inquiry. I established that fashion PR is not practised in a way consistent with mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations, which have relegated fashion PR to a ‘craft’ practice due to its association with marketing, promotion and publicity. In this chapter, I present the findings drawn from the analysis of interviews with six practitioners working in the Australian fashion industry. This chapter aims to challenge mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations by providing an in-depth understanding of the roles and responsibilities of fashion PR practitioners from the perspective and experiences of the practitioners. This chapter begins by discussing the participants’ perceptions of the function and purpose of fashion PR. Following this, I analyse how the fashion PR practitioners’ embrace social media in their work and perceive the implications of social media on fashion PR’s role in the marketing mix. I then challenge the superficial stereotype of the fashion industry by discussing the fashion PR practitioners’ use of strategy and relationship management.

Fashion PR is not Glamorous

Most participants acknowledged that fashion PR is considered to be ‘glamorous’. Caitlyn put it bluntly: “People believe PR is all about parties, air-kissing and long boozy lunches. The reality is different.” Anna commented:

Even from my friends and acquaintances, yes, they think it is very glamorous and they think you just teeter around in high-heels and get to go to all the shows and
drink champagne and that it’s all quite relaxed. The reality is long hours and you are the spokesperson for an entire brand so there is a lot of pressure on you to deliver.

Dana and Flynn explained that fashion PR practitioners are often not perceived as genuine. However, most participants were not overly concerned with the stereotypes attributed to their role. Anna expressed, “I have no qualms about what I do.” However, Dana did admit to having some apprehensions about the fashion PR specialty:

I know when I travel and you’re going overseas and you have to fill out what you do, I always go “I don’t know”, because I guess it does come with a lot of these negative connotations and I do myself hold these. But I really believe in what we do - helping these amazing brands break out and make a business. So I think of myself more as a business advisor.

The participants’ responses reinforce the low status attributed to fashion PR. In the case of Dana, she prefers not to think of herself as a public relations practitioner.

The common perceptions of fashion PR are quite different from the reality, as evident when participants were asked what fashion PR means to them. ‘Communication’, ‘publics’ and ‘media’/‘press’ were common words participants used to describe fashion PR. An analysis of participant responses suggests the role of fashion PR is to communicate information about a client’s product or brand to publics through the media. In this sense, most participants thought of themselves as the ‘middle man’ between the brand and its publics. Responses also implied fashion PR is a form of brand management, with the majority of participants referring to the communication of “key brand messages” to promote a label with a distinct focus on media relations. Flynn commented, “To explain to people what I do in a nutshell, I would say I liaise with the media to promote the brand.” He added, “I always say my role is to make money for the company; everyone else’s is to spend it.” Flynn’s
comment suggests fashion PR functions to support marketing efforts, as I identified in Chapter One that public relations saves money for the organisation, while marketing makes money for the organisation (Stroh 2007). Eva suggested her role entails brand promotion and publicity, labelling it as a “service which allows companies and brands to promote their key brand messages through editorial means.” Caitlyn said her role is about “telling the stories” of their clients to the media and public in an “exciting and engaging way.” The participants’ responses illustrate the tensions between public relations and marketing reiterated throughout this thesis. Flynn’s labelling of his role as a form of brand promotion contributing to sales objectives aligns the function of fashion PR with the fourth ‘P’ of marketing. However, Caitlyn’s use of narrative separates the notion of fashion PR as a support function of the marketing mix. As discussed in Chapters Two and Four, social media has further complicated the blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing.

Social Media and the Marketing Mix

Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, emerged in the practitioner interviews as a useful platform to communicate with editors, clients and consumers; to monitor competitors; and to promote clients and products. All participants acknowledged the huge impact social media is having on fashion PR. Social media was perceived by all participants as a medium you have to engage in, or risk getting left behind. Caitlyn noted the impact social media is having on the fashion industry from all angles - public relations, media, consumers and the designers themselves. Eva considers 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 $X$ 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.

In Chapter Two, I discussed how social media is transforming public relations practices in the fashion industry. Participants also alluded to this, suggesting that social media and the online world are impacting on traditional public relations practices. Flynn explained:

People want things so immediately that a press release for a collection, you could send out the same one for six months, but now everyone wants something very different every day. Especially with the 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 $X$ [the designer he represents] and then everyday I’m pretty much answering similar questions in a different way to people.

Flynn’s comment illustrates social media’s impact on the function and pace of fashion PR practices. Although participants acknowledged the importance of having an online presence, they suggested online activity is not without its limitations. For example, Flynn suggested that the immediacy of the Internet has made it harder for fashion PR practitioners to maintain exclusive stories as well as effectively plan and manage communication campaigns. This perception reflects an observation in the previous chapter when a brand ambassador ‘tweeted’ the confidential location of a photoshoot, thus unintentionally breaking the story to the news media.

The General Pants Co and Gasp case studies discussed in Chapter Two illustrated how social media is perceived to empower consumers. Participants reiterated this perception in their responses. Anna commented:
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 the consumer, stating, “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 more of a 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,” she said.

The ethnographic findings presented in Chapter Four found that the organisation where the researcher worked uses social media to reach fashion publics, however, predominantly for promotional purposes. In contrast, the participants’ comments outlined in this chapter suggest fashion consumers are viewed as more autonomous, where they control how they engage with online brands, rather than being the passive target of promotional campaigns. The participants’ responses in this chapter do not imply that social media is used as a means of brand promotion and income generation. In this sense, the fashion PR practitioners interviewed are not embracing social media to contribute to marketing objectives; rather, they are seeking to engage meaningfully with fashion publics. This finding presents a real shift in differentiating public relations and marketing in the fashion sector, as it appears, at least for these
practitioners, public relations through social media is not functioning to support marketing efforts but rather to engage publics.

Despite this possible shift in understanding the role of public relations in the fashion sector, all participants, except for Caitlyn, perceived fashion PR to be part of the marketing mix. However several participants noted that for upcoming and smaller fashion labels, public relations might be the only financially viable option for brand promotion. As Eva put it, “Fashion PR is very valuable because it is one of the only ways to promote your brand cost effectively.” She added, “It’s more about PR but we do tend to fall into that line of marketing as well. Only because we’re a small agency and we work with clients that come to us and quite often the brief is beyond PR.”

Dana suggested that the use of marketing in her agency depends on the brand and the budget. In-house practitioners, Anna and Flynn, said they perform dual roles of both public relations and marketing. Anna suggested marketing is concerned with “overall brand strategy on a global perspective” in comparison to public relations which is “more localised,” possibly suggesting that she perceives public relations as more concerned with engagement of local target publics. When asked if it is difficult to separate her dual role, Anna explained:

Marketing is definitely a lot more structured and a lot more to do with ROI [return on investment] and having a meaningful quantifiable outcome. Publicity is a little bit more ambiguous and it doesn’t have as much structure as marketing I would say. For me, it’s quite difficult to separate the two and I’m not doing marketing one day and publicity the next. They blend with each other.

The analysis of participants’ responses suggests a significant lack of distinction between public relations and marketing. Anna and Flynn’s dual roles suggest that fashion PR and fashion marketing often work together depending on the client’s
needs. However, public relations is also presented as a cheaper alternative for brands, which do not have excessive budgets for marketing and advertising campaigns. The perception of fashion PR as ‘cheap’ is perhaps one of the contributing factors to the low status of the field, and the dominance of marketing discourse and marketing activity in the fashion sector.

Fashion PR and Strategic Communication

Participants were asked to explain the process they use to plan, implement and evaluate fashion campaigns. Practitioners emphasised the necessity of strategic practices, which ensure longevity of the fashion label being represented, and appropriately directed publicity. Flynn suggested an adaptive strategy is needed due to the dynamic context of the fashion industry.

There is a strategic plan that you have to implement especially every season because it’s fashion, which is so turbulent, so you do have to have a strategic plan so the company will grow. But also there are strategic things about where you want to push the PR and what angles and whether it’s just on a local level. We are trying to do a lot of work now in Asia because we see that’s where a big market is, whereas our focus used to be in the U.S., but we changed that after the GFC [global financial crisis]. . . . It’s not about just getting publicity for the sake of publicity, you have to make sure it is aimed, directed and received by the right people.

Echoing Flynn’s comment, Anna also conveyed the importance of implementing strategically planned publicity campaigns.

I’m working a season ahead so you need to be strategic because although publicity is very opportunistic, it is also very planned and considered so if you’re not organised in that way, you’re not going to achieve the outcomes.

As observed in the ethnographic inquiry, Dana suggested both strategic planning and reactive day-to-day planning is necessary to contend with the turbulent nature of the fashion industry. She commented, “Our practices are constantly changing rather than
setting say a seasonal kind of plan in place. . . . I think you’ve got to be really adaptable.” She added that strategic planning is needed to ensure the longevity of fashion brands:

I do see a lot of brands that come out and they make a big bang and it is just promotion, promotion, promotion and then it disappears, which is not what we’re trying to do. So everything we do we think about what that will mean for the future. I find it a lot more strategic than just simply promotion. I want my brands to be around for a long time. I want them to have a career in their brand and their business.

Dana’s comment confirms fashion PR is not just publicity and promotion; rather, there is a need for well-researched public relations strategies to support business goals and particular contexts. In addition, agency practitioners acknowledged the importance of developing strategies from an analysis of clients’ needs. Dana said her agency does not plan campaigns based on a “blanket approach.” Similarly, Caitlyn explained, “In reality, every strategy is different and we don’t have a ‘one-size-fits-all’ method in our agency, rather, we tailor the strategies to our clients’ needs.”

The participants’ responses suggest that the turbulent nature of the fashion industry requires both strategically planned and reactive practices. Strategic planning is not only used to generate effective brand promotion and publicity, but also to monitor and assess the financial health of the brand. In this sense, fashion PR is strategic. This understanding challenges the notion of fashion PR as a ‘craft’ practice, suggesting the distinction between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices is unsustainable. However, Eva reinforced the promotional and even superficial stereotype often associated with the fashion industry, commenting, “Ideally it [fashion PR] would be professional. I don’t think it is.” She added that fashion PR is “a lot less structured. It’s probably more fun. It’s a lot more ad hoc.”
In Chapter Two, I established the importance of research in the planning stage of strategic communication (DeVries 1998; Noricks 2006, 2011; Sherman & Perlman 2010). The participants’ responses in this chapter confirm information gathering, research, and analysis are used to inform their fashion campaigns and public relations strategies. Anna identified accounting for budgets, analysing readership and circulation details, understanding the psychographics and spending habits of the target audience, attending trend briefings, and understanding retail trends as important factors in the planning stage of a campaign. Flynn said he analyses the current economic situation of the location for the proposed campaign, as well as the success of previous campaigns:

For the last three years, we did shows at Rosemount Australian Fashion Week, but this summer, we decided to put a different spin on it because the format of the fashion parade - unless you had a very exciting budget or you were a new up-and-coming label - it was hard to create something different. So we decided rather than doing a catwalk show that we would do an exhibition of photography that became a booklet, that also became our summer looks magazine.

In addition, participants felt a responsibility to stay abreast of current industry and consumer trends. Industry trade publication *Rag Trader* was the most popular. Other publications identified by participants included *Drapers, Marie Claire, InStyle Magazine, Harper’s Bazaar, Grazia,* and *B&T.* Flynn also mentioned Perth’s local newspaper the *West Australian.* The participants’ use of research confirms Chapter Two’s discussion on the need for fashion PR practitioners to keep informed of industry trends and news. It reinforces ethnographic observations in Chapter Four which revealed fashion PR practitioners must immerse themselves in the fashion culture to practise fashion PR effectively. The use of research undermines to some extent the glamorous stereotype of the fashion industry, illustrating the in-depth
knowledge of the entire fashion sector necessary to successfully plan a fashion PR campaign. As Eva commented, “the success of the campaign lends itself to the success of the planning and execution.”

Practitioners suggested the execution of a fashion PR campaign is initiated through sending out media releases; organising and orchestrating events such as launch parties, runway shows and in-store events; securing showroom appointments with the media; and sending sample products to fashion editors. Social media and celebrity endorsement were identified as common channels and tactics to add leverage to a campaign. However, Anna explained that international celebrities have more impact in Australia: “It [celebrity endorsement] is important but it’s certainly not one of our most valued strategies. . . . I think we have more impact getting U.S. or U.K. celebrity coverage over here.” Dana agreed:

I wouldn’t say it’s [celebrity endorsement] a huge part of what we do here - I don’t think Australia has that culture. I don’t think we have Australian celebrities that people really look toward for fashion tips. We’re more interested in what’s going on in America and London.

Overall, participants noted celebrity endorsement as a valuable promotional tactic; however, the fashion PR practitioners did not give the same weight to celebrity endorsement as the practitioner in the organisation presented in Chapter Four’s ethnographic findings.

Practitioners confirmed the difficulty in evaluating fashion campaigns, identified in Chapter Two through the literature review of fashion PR and Chapter Four’s ethnographic study. The various responses of participants in this chapter indicates there is no standard evaluation method used in fashion PR. Participants described the
fashion PR process as “ambiguous” and “not measurable.” The ethnographic findings suggested that evaluation reports and media clippings were the dominant methods used to evaluate campaigns in one retail organisation. The interview participants also made reference to these methods, along with analysing the sell-through performance of products in store, key performance indicators (KPIs), measuring the outcome of the campaign with the initial objectives, and working out the monetary value of the media coverage. Dana suggested the method of evaluation used is dependent on the client.

We do different things for each brand. . . . For example, X [fashion designer] is one of the busiest people I know - she’s just not interested in reading a monthly report; she just does not care, so if something is important, I call her and we talk on the phone.

Whereas someone like Y [fashion label] requires maybe four types of reports each month. They require a call every Friday, so that’s how I work with them.

Z, [fashion label] we just talk naturally - they don’t want a monthly report. A lot of our designers don’t actually want that, they want to see the results. They don’t want to see this big list of all the things that we tried that didn’t work; it’s just to communicate the positives and the things that are important to cut through all the crap really. I just don’t think that that method is particularly effective, I don’t think that it utilises anyone’s time well.

Inconsistent methods of evaluation and in particular a focus on ‘the positives’ rather than an objective appraisal of the outcomes and impact of public relations activity has implications for professional understandings of fashion PR. The failure to adequately evaluate public relations activity has contributed to the low status of fashion PR. However, the interview findings, particularly Dana’s comment, question the effectiveness of formal written evaluation reports, suggesting that interpersonal communication with clients is a more effective method of reporting evaluation of public relations activity.
Fashion PR and Relationship Management

The analysis of interviews with the practitioners suggest relationship management is a dominant function of the fashion PR specialty. Relationships with clients, the media, stylists, consumers and retailers, suppliers, brand affiliates, and staff emerged from the participants’ responses. As Flynn put it:

You have to juggle sponsors, other staff members, other people that help you in the creation of your product whether it’s make-up artists or models or hair stylists or working with shoe designers, you know there’s this whole interaction of all these personalities and you have to make sure that everyone walks away happy.

However, the participants particularly acknowledged the importance of media relations in their field. Practitioners identified writing media releases, pitching stories to the media, and sending product to fashion editors for photoshoots and editorial means as methods of maintaining ongoing relationships with the media. But Dana pointed out that effective media relations is about more than just “pumping out press releases”:

I think practitioners make the mistake of thinking if I click a button, this is going to save me hours and hours, but in fact you’ve just sent the same information to six hundred people in Sydney who all realise that they’re not the only person who has received it.

In Chapter Two, I discussed Payless ShoeSource’s rebranding campaign, which utilised fashion ‘influencers’, particularly the fashion media, as a strategy to reposition the brand as fashionable, yet affordable. Similarly, Dana suggested that managing relationships in fashion PR is about targeting influencers.

I think what we do is really difficult. I mean we have to grow something and talk about it in a specific way and try and build these relationships with people [i.e. fashion editors] who influence other people [i.e. fashion consumers].
Dana’s comment suggests the need for fashion PR practitioners to build relationships with fashion influencers who can promote your brand. Reinforcing Dana’s comment, participants discussed the importance of constantly being in touch with the media to ensure long-term successful relationships. Telephone calls, emails, regular showroom appointments and social networking sites such as Twitter were all mentioned as tools for maintaining regular contact. Eva explained:

It’s about always being around, that’s what it comes down to. Just always being approachable, being helpful - it’s good to be proactive. At the end of the day, you say managing relationships; it’s no different from managing your friendships. It’s about being personable.

Eva’s comment suggests she perceives professionalism in her field in terms of the personality model. As discussed in Chapter One, the personality model’s emphasis is on “other things than expert knowledge - namely, devotion, personality, effort, and enthusiasm” (van Ruler 2005, 164). Further reinforcing the relevance of the personality model to fashion PR is the fact that none of the participants interviewed are currently members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The fashion PR practitioners interviewed did not consider membership to the PRIA as relevant to their field. Eva remarked that “obviously their [the PRIA’s] reach isn’t very relevant or it’s not targeted enough.” The PRIA’s failure to acknowledge the fashion PR specialty was also observed in the ethnographic study in the previous chapter. This perceived lack of relevance suggests the industry body does not recognise fashion PR as a distinct specialty within public relations, or even as a professional practice within the field. In addition, participants also suggested professionalism in their field is achieved through honesty and delivering what has been promised. Bethany believes “delivering what you say you will deliver, when you say you will deliver it” is vital for maintaining effective media relationships. The
participants’ perceptions of professionalism as being personable, honest, and devoted, challenges the trait approach - expressed through the troika of characteristics formal knowledge, ethics, and certification - commonly used to measure professionalism in public relations. This finding confirms the discussion in Chapter One regarding the inconsistent views associated with the notion of ‘professionalism’.

Participants identified the need to understand how the media operates and essentially what editors want as vital elements to managing relationships with the media. Bethany highlighted the importance of knowing your media: “Make sure you read the journalist’s column and customise your pitch to suit their style/angle.” The need for fashion PR practitioners to understand the media was also observed in the ethnographic study. In Chapter Two, I discussed the importance of fashion PR practitioners building relationships with bloggers. The analysis of participant responses suggests in-house blogs and relationships with bloggers is not a prominent activity for the fashion PR practitioners interviewed. However, Dana reiterated the growing importance of treating 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.

Through an analysis of fashion PR practitioners’ perceptions and experiences, this chapter aimed to contribute a deeper understanding of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. Drawing on the practitioners’ perspectives, the findings illustrate that the glamorous stereotype associated with the fashion industry is not reflective of reality. Participants were found to embrace strategy in terms of research
and planning informing strategy development, but to a lesser extent in terms of evaluating the impact of their fashion PR activity. Participants are not members of the PRIA; they did not perceive the industry body to be relevant to the fashion PR specialty. Despite their non-membership of the professional association, participants perceived their activity as ‘professional’, in that it aimed to ensure the best possible outcome for their client or employer, both in terms of generating publicity and ensuring longevity for the brand/s they represent. This understanding challenges the notion of fashion PR as a ‘craft’ and highlights the artificial distinction between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices. Furthermore, the impact of the fashion industry’s turbulent nature on fashion PR practices was evident, requiring fashion PR practitioners to be reactive and adapt strategies according to external pressures and clients’ needs. This finding challenges current mainstream understandings of public relations, which try to enforce a ‘one-fits-all’ approach. Although a blurring of the disciplinary boundaries between public relations and marketing was evident, the majority of participants acknowledged that their role in fashion PR was part of the marketing mix. However, there is sometimes a different understanding of the function of public relations, particularly in the use of social media to engage fashion publics. In the next chapter, I integrate the findings of this research to draw final conclusions on the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. It questioned the suitability of the dominant paradigm as an adequate conceptual model for understanding public relations. This thesis suggests that J. Grunig and Hunt’s ‘professional’ two-way symmetrical model is not reflective of industry practices as it fails to consider the diversity of public relations practices. Through an analysis of the ethnographic study and the semi-structured interviews, this thesis suggests that fashion PR has been relegated to a ‘craft’ in an effort to maintain public relations’ professional status.

This thesis began with a discussion of the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism. It discussed the influence of the dominant paradigm on mainstream theoretical perspectives of public relations and the push to claim professional status for public relations by defining it as a management function rather than part of the marketing mix. In Chapter One, I exposed the flaws in mainstream approaches to understanding the diversity of public relations practices. I argued that the dominant paradigm has contributed limited theoretical insights into public relations practices outside of a corporate environment. In addition, I identified that the feminisation of public relations contributed to a separation between professional and technical, or ‘craft’, public relations activity, partly to ensure professional recognition for public relations activity in corporate and government sectors.

In Chapter Two, I focused specifically on fashion PR and the Australian fashion industry to provide insights into a practice that has received little academic attention from public relations scholars. This chapter challenged the stereotypes about the
glamour and frivolity of the fashion industry, suggesting public relations in this environment is dynamic, fast-paced, and embraces both ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices. Despite this finding, Chapter Two revealed that fashion PR remains marginalised from mainstream understandings of public relations, as the specialty is perceived as a ‘craft’ closely aligned to marketing, promotion and publicity. This discussion reinforced the need to study public relations according to the work performed by practitioners in order to acknowledge the diversity of practice. In addition, the analysis of social media case studies in Chapter Two revealed a convergence of public relations and marketing roles when social media is used in the fashion industry. However, the case studies demonstrated that the fashion industry is not yet embracing the potential social media offers to engage with fashion publics and fashion consumers; rather the industry uses social media platforms primarily for one-way promotional purposes.

In Chapter Three, I outlined the research design and methodology used to investigate the fashion PR specialty in this thesis. I established that a multi-method qualitative research design using ethnography and practitioner interviews maximises the opportunity to provide a rich and meaningful insight into the use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry, drawing on the observations and experiences of the researcher and the perspectives of fashion PR practitioners.

In Chapters Four and Five, I reported and discussed the findings of the ethnographic study and semi-structured interviews respectively. These chapters confirmed the low status of fashion PR, which has been relegated to a ‘craft’ due to its association with marketing, promotion and publicity, as well as because of the stereotypes of fashion
as a glamorous, superficial and indeed, feminised, industry. However, the findings of
this thesis suggest that fashion PR practitioners embrace both ‘craft’ (i.e. media
relations, celebrity endorsement) and ‘professional’ (i.e. strategic communication)
practices in their work. To some extent, all of these practices are strategic in that they
are informed by research, carefully planned to meet organisational goals and
objectives, require ongoing negotiation and relationship management, and aim to
position the organisation or client in ways that are relevant to various stakeholders.
These activities illustrate that fashion PR is about more than just promotion and
publicity, denouncing the notion of fashion PR as ‘fluff’. These findings demonstrate
that the theoretical gap between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ public relations cannot be
sustained, suggesting that the dominant paradigm is not an adequate conceptual
model for understanding the diversity of public relations practices.

Although this thesis found fashion PR practitioners embrace strategy in terms of
research, objective setting and planning, the use of evaluation methods proved to be
inconsistent. The participants in this research attributed the lack of formal evaluation
methods to being time-poor. They also suggested that interpersonal communication
with clients is a more effective method to appraise outcomes of fashion PR
campaigns. Nonetheless, the failure to adequately evaluate fashion PR campaigns,
other than in terms of media coverage, client impressions, and sales, has contributed
to the low status of the fashion PR specialty.

Despite the stereotypes associated with the fashion industry, the analysis of
ethnographic observations and participant responses in this thesis suggest that
fashion PR practitioners perceive the fashion PR field to be a profession, particularly
where ‘professional’ means working to meet the goals and objectives of their client or employer. This finding supports studies which identify practitioners’ understandings of professionalism (see van Ruler 2005). However, the fashion PR practitioners in this research project did not perceive alliance to industry bodies such as the PRIA to impact on the professionalism of their work. In fact, both the ethnographic and interview findings revealed that the fashion PR practitioners in this study did not perceive the PRIA to have any direct relevance to their work in the fashion PR field, as its focus was perceived to be on public relations practitioners working in corporate and government public relations sectors.

In addition, the findings of Chapters Four and Five confirmed the overlap between public relations and marketing activity. In both the ethnographic findings and the interviews with fashion PR practitioners, the fashion PR specialty was perceived to be part of the marketing mix. Only one participant suggested fashion PR does not function to support marketing efforts; all other participants perceived fashion PR and fashion marketing roles to blend, suggesting the disciplinary boundaries between public relations and marketing are weak, and in practice, difficult to distinguish.

Triangulating the ethnographic and interview findings revealed inconsistencies in fashion PR’s use of social media. Social media was introduced in a discussion in Chapter Two where I established through case studies that it was primarily used in the fashion industry for marketing purposes. The ethnographic findings presented in Chapter Four found the organisation where the researcher worked used social media predominantly for promotional purposes rather than to actively engage with customer publics. These findings suggest fashion PR is embracing social media to contribute
to marketing objectives. In contrast, the findings presented in Chapter Five suggest that the fashion PR practitioners interviewed are seeking to engage meaningfully with fashion publics through social media, rather than to use social media solely to contribute to marketing efforts. However, further research is needed to determine how successfully the fashion PR practitioners were ‘engaging’ target publics. This investigation of the use of social media in fashion PR presents inconclusive findings, as in some instances fashion PR and fashion marketing roles converge when using social media, while in other cases, social media is used to support fashion PR.

In summary, this thesis reveals that fashion PR does not fit into mainstream theoretical perspectives and definitions of public relations. These understandings have marginalised the fashion PR specialty in order to maintain the public relations industry’s image as a management function and a corporate activity. Furthermore, the fashion PR specialty has been relegated to a ‘craft’ i.e. a non-professional practice as part of the public relations industry’s drive towards professionalism. The marginalisation of fashion PR from mainstream theories and understandings of public relations can be attributed to, in part, its close links with marketing, promotion and publicity, the feminisation of fashion PR (and public relations generally), and perceptions of fashion PR as glamorous and superficial. In investigating public relations in the Australian fashion industry, this thesis revealed that J. Grunig and Hunt’s dominant paradigm is not an adequate conceptual model for understanding the diversity of public relations practices. This thesis therefore calls for the distinction between ‘craft’ and ‘professional’ practices to be re-evaluated to embrace and fully recognise the heterogeneous nature of public relations activity.
Exploring public relations in a non-corporate sector provides a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge underpinning the public relations industry, informing new understandings of public relations. Further studies of public relations practices outside of a management function are needed to embrace the heterogeneous nature of the field. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, future studies on the fashion PR specialty could examine fashion PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries in order to investigate more fully the links between public relations and culture, and to recognise the social impact of public relations activity. Given the inconsistencies in the fashion industry’s use of social media, more research is required to understand how the fashion industry, or more specifically the fashion PR specialty, is using social media. Such research will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic and diverse field of public relations.
## APPENDIX ONE

### Australian Fashion Courses Offering Marketing Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Course Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canberra Institute of Technology</td>
<td>Fashion Design (Bachelor of Design)</td>
<td>ACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Bence School of Fashion</td>
<td>Applied Fashion Design and Technology</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast TAFE</td>
<td>Applied Fashion Design and Technology</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raffles College of Design and Commerce</td>
<td>Bachelor of Design majoring in Fashion Marketing</td>
<td>NSW</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sydney Community College</td>
<td>How to Start Your Own Fashion Label</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney Institute Colleges</td>
<td>Fashion Design</td>
<td>NSW</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Academy of Design</td>
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<td>Queensland University of Technology</td>
<td>Bachelor of Fine Arts (Fashion)</td>
<td>QLD</td>
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<tr>
<td>College of Fashion Design</td>
<td>Fashion Design and Technology</td>
<td>Online course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX TWO

Interview Question Guide

• How did you start working in fashion?

• Can you briefly tell me about the company you currently work for? (i.e. in-house or agency)

• What is your job title?

• How do you define public relations in your field?

• What tasks do you carry out on a daily basis?

• How would you define the function of your role? (i.e. management, marketing, promotion, publicity)

• What stereotypes do you think people outside the industry, or those specialising in other areas of public relations might have about fashion PR practitioners?

• Do these stereotypes impact on the way you describe your job role to others?

• Are you aware of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (the PRIA)? (i) are you a member? (ii) have you referred to their Code of Ethics for guidance?

• Public relations theory has defined two types of practices: ‘craft’ and ‘professional’. Practitioners of ‘craft’ public relations focus on gaining publicity and getting information into the media, whereas practitioners of ‘professional’ public relations rely on a formal body of knowledge and see their role as having a strategic purpose. How would you define fashion PR? i.e. as a ‘craft’ or a ‘profession’?

• What industry trade publications, if any, do you read?

• Do they directly impact on the decisions you make on a day-to-day basis?

• Can you briefly outline how you would go about planning an event or campaign? (i.e. research, objective setting, budgets etc)

• What strategies and tactics would you typically use in these campaigns?

• Is celebrity endorsement important in your fashion PR campaigns?

• How is the success of a fashion PR campaign evaluated?
• How do you form and manage relationships with:
  (i) the media
  (ii) consumers
  (iii) clients/suppliers

• What impact do you think social media will have/is having on fashion PR?

• Is there anything else you would like to discuss about your role in fashion PR?

• Are you happy for me to contact you at a later date to clarify any points or ask additional questions?
REFERENCES


Newsom, D., J. Turk, and D. Kruckeberg. 1996. This is PR: The Realities of Public


