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Beyond the catwalk: Fashion public relations and social media in Australia

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Abstract

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

Keywords

public relations; fashion; Australia; social media

Introduction

The Australian fashion industry, worth an estimated AU\$13 billion and employing over 70,000 people, has suffered negative growth in the past five years (IbisWorld, 2013). Given the downturn in the sector, social media, such as blogs, microblogging, podcasting, photo and video sharing sites, social networks, and virtual worlds, is increasingly important to fashion PR (Experian, 2012a; 2012b). Exploring social media use in fashion PR may offer new understandings of public relations in an increasingly networked world and addresses calls to investigate the full range of public relations activities beyond the corporate sector (L'Etang, 2006; Noricks, 2006).

In this study, fashion PR refers to the public relations role in managing fashion labels or brands, rather than celebrity or model management. Sherman and Perlman define fashion PR as “being in touch with the company’s audiences, creating strong relationships with them, reaching out to the media, initiating messages that project positive images of the company, assuming social responsibility, and even adjusting company policies” (2010, p. *xix*). Despite the economic and cultural significance of the fashion industry, little academic attention has been paid to fashion PR, which is often perceived as superficial and frivolous, and associated with marketing, promotion and image management (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013). The public relations industry's drive towards professional status has marginalised niche practices that do not fit into the dominant conceptualisation of public relations as a unique strategic management discipline primarily in the corporate sector (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013; L'Etang 2008; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006).

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

Background

Social media and fashion PR

Social media is transforming public relations, and both practitioners and academics are grappling with its impact on traditional public relations concepts and practices (Fitch, 2012). Studies reveal Australian practitioners increasingly experiment with social media in professional contexts (Robson & James, 2012) although they adopt it erratically (Macnamara, 2011) and tend to use social media primarily for marketing and brand promotion purposes (Macnamara, 2010). Noricks identifies the significance of social media for fashion PR is that it potentially enables more engagement with fashion publics:

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

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

Social media therefore appears to provide fashion PR practitioners with opportunities to build brand reputation and awareness, gain media attention, and interact with fashion publics (Business of Fashion, 2009; Noricks, 2012). Industry commentators perceive fashion PR’s role is to help “clients manage the new, constantly changing paradigm of digital fashion communications” (Amed, 2011, para. 2). However, the fashion industry was initially slow to adopt social media; some labels ignored social media and misunderstood the potential to engage stakeholders, while others used it only for sales and promotional purposes (Wright, 2009). For a few organisations, social media is still not on the agenda (Smith, 2013). Indeed, Garland describes the “mature

fashion sector” in Australia as “staggeringly behind on use of technology” and identifies the need for more innovative strategies, including better use of social media, in the current “soft retail economy” (2013, para. 9, 16).

The adoption of social media and its significance for fashion PR, and indeed more broadly, public relations, needs further investigation. Fashion industry commentators present mixed understandings of social media and frequently suggest its value in marketing terms such as the ways it can contribute to “sales” and increase “customer bases” (Wright, 2009, para. 1). Such understandings appear to ignore the potential of social media to contribute to public relations concepts such as relationship building with consumer publics and engaging stakeholders in dialogic and meaningful ways (Noricks, 2012; Sherman & Perlman, 2010). Greenhill coined the term “paper pixel syndrome” to describe forcing traditional media relations and promotional activity onto social media platforms without any changes, thereby failing to exploit the interactivity of social media (2011, para. 12). A dichotomy appears to be emerging between ‘traditional’ fashion PR and fashion PR in a social media world (Noricks, 2012), exacerbating the distinction between marketing and public relations functions for fashion PR (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013). More research is therefore needed to understand how fashion PR practitioners engage with social media in their day-to-day practice and understand their public relations work.

Social media in Australian fashion PR

Despite the discussion of some brands’ reluctance to embrace social media in the previous section, the use of social media in the Australian fashion industry is now widespread. Australian retailers David Jones and Myer, for example, livestreamed their Spring Summer 2012/13

collection launches, allowing social media users to take a ‘virtual’ front row seat through Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube. More broadly, fashion labels are embracing “bricks and clicks” (that is, physical and online shops) and even “e-tail” (online only) models (Experian, 2012a, p. 3). Perth fashion entrepreneur Zara Bryson, in response to the challenging retail sector, closed both her boutiques to focus on the online store (Anderson, 2013; Davies, 2012) and Miishka, an Australian fashion label, successfully established its business solely through Facebook, before setting up an online store (Facebook, 2012). Traditional media publications engage fashion publics online: *Vogue Australia* uses Twitter for “see it first and tweet it first” fashion news; Tumblr for “visual feasting”; Instagram for behind-the-scenes fashion moments; and Facebook as a platform for consumers to interact with the magazine’s editors (Vogue, 2012, p. 68). Bloggers have emerged as expert fashion commentators, shaping brands and significantly influencing what is on-trend (Dalto, 2010; Kurutz, 2011; Westlake, 2011). It is therefore difficult to ignore just how much the fashion industry is online, although it appears many Australian fashion retailers struggle to understand the online environment (Kempson, 2013).

Three recent Australian examples illustrate social media challenges for fashion PR practitioners. In September 2011, *Gasp Jeans* dominated social media discussions and mainstream news after a customer emailed *Gasp* management to complain about a male sales assistant’s comments about her appearance (Haddow 2011; Sholl 2011). Rather than an apology, the customer received a mistake-ridden response, supporting the actions of the sales assistant and suggesting the customer was an “undesirable” time-waster (as cited in Sholl 2011, para. 8-9). The reply received national and international media coverage, became a trending topic on Twitter, saw the fashion label’s Facebook page inundated with derogatory posts and led to the establishment of

‘We Hate Gasp’ and ‘Boycott Gasp’ Facebook groups (Cooper, 2011). *Gasp* promoted their public relations mishap with the view that “any publicity is good publicity” (Sholl, 2011, para. 13), stating that although the email response was not a publicity stunt, the retailer was thrilled with the attention. *Gasp* spokesperson Matthew Chidgey (as cited in Cooper, 2011, para. 14-15) said of the customer who complained: “Our shops are packed, everyone knows us now and I can’t thank her enough for what she did for us.”

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

In the third example, a brand repositioning exercise by an Australian clothing discounter aimed to reach their youth public “through a platform and language they speak” (Mumbrella, 2011). *Direct Factory Outlet (DFO)* launched a public relations campaign featuring a series of videos

on Facebook telling the story of ‘Zoe Walker’ and her love triangle. Viewers must ‘like’ Zoe’s Facebook page to see more of the love story, as well as information on the clothing featured in the videos. Comments on *Mumbrella* (2011), a media and marketing industry website, criticise the campaign for its lack of authenticity. Although the campaign demonstrates that *DFO* is embracing social media to reach fashion publics, employing an interactive platform such as Facebook does not automatically imply the company is ‘engaging’ with its target audience.

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

Research design

This study investigates perceptions of social media in terms of the day-to-day activities and experiences of Australian fashion PR practitioners, drawing on an ethnographic study and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six practitioners. The research questions are:

- How do participants use social media in their day-to-day work?
- How do participants perceive fashion PR is changing in response to social media?

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

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

The researchers drew on the participant observer's and interview participants' perceptions and experiences to develop an understanding of social media use in Australian fashion PR.

References to social media in the field notes, journal entries and interview transcripts were analysed using open and pattern coding, whereby patterns, ideas and common keywords emerged directly from participants' responses (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). These data were then organised according to dominant themes. The researchers compared and discussed the initial identification of themes emerging from analysis of the data, and re-analysed the data. These themes—social media use; engaging fashion publics; and working with bloggers—are used to structure the discussion in the following section. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used to report participants' comments and the organisation that is the site of the ethnographic study is not identified.

Scope and limitations

The focus of this paper is perceptions and experiences of social media use in fashion PR in Australia. The findings about fashion PR in Australia are reported elsewhere (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013). One of the researchers has worked part-time in a retail role in the Australian fashion industry for five years and therefore is familiar with industry trends. Their insider network may have facilitated access to participants in this study.

A potential limitation is the low number of interview participants in the sample. However, a large sample could potentially reduce the depth and richness of the findings (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Grunig, 2008). In addition, the use of method triangulation through the

combination of interview research and participant observation offers multiple perspectives on the topic of study and strengthens research findings (Flick, 2009).

A significant limitation is the speed of change in both technology and social media use (Fitch, 2012). For example, the introduction of a Pinterest iPhone app in March 2011 has contributed to the widespread use of Pinterest in fashion PR (Carlson, 2012), yet this platform, along with Instagram, which is now popular, did not feature prominently in participants' perceptions of their work at the time this research was conducted in 2011. This issue illustrates the impact of social media on public relations, and the dynamic sector in which practitioners work.

Findings and discussion

Using social media

All participants acknowledged the huge impact of social media on fashion PR; participants perceived they *had* to engage in social media, or risk getting left behind. Facebook and Twitter emerged in the practitioner interviews as useful platforms to communicate with editors, clients and consumers; to monitor competitors; and also to promote clients and products. Caitlyn noted the impact of social media on the fashion industry from all angles—public relations, media, consumers and the designers themselves. Eva considered social media as the “big thing at the moment”:

Brands aren't satisfied with only being seen in your traditional magazines and newspapers. Just to give you an example, we look after the fashion label [brand] and at the end of our Fashion Week campaign, [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.

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

The researcher found that social media is relatively new for the organisation and platforms such as Facebook have only been used since May 2011. The researcher observed the organisation adopts a traditional top-down communication approach in their use of social media. For example, the Facebook profile was managed nationally and content was not specifically tailored for local publics or that platform. Instead, Facebook was predominantly used for promotion with posts about sales, in-store appearances, and upcoming events. Few attempts were made to encourage user engagement and interactivity through, for instance, encouraging user-generated content or posing questions in status updates to initiate conversation. The national office used Facebook primarily for sales promotions and announcements.

The Perth-based PR and events manager did not have access to the organisation's official Facebook site and used her personal Facebook profile to update interstate colleagues on the progress of events by uploading pictures; she also used her Facebook page for professional networking. Despite the centralisation of the organisation's social media use in the head office, the state-based PR and events manager was a proactive user of social media and used social networking sites, blogs and local news sites to keep up-to-date with current fashion and retail trends, as well as to stay abreast of local fashion and competitor news.

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

The post contained incorrect information and didn't do justice to the designer's latest work and its promotion of the WA fashion industry—it lacked local perspective. The blog post clearly illustrated that the organisation views social media as 'just another

channel'. It wasn't tailored for the online world, but was taken straight from a media release sent to fashion editors.

This example illustrates Greenhill's (2011) "paper pixel syndrome" whereby content developed and produced for traditional media is forced onto new media platforms without any adaptation.

Interview participants more readily adapted their approach in social media.

Relating with, or marketing to, publics

Analysis of the journal and field-notes suggests the organisation's use of social media blurs the boundaries between public relations and marketing, as akin to the *DFO* example, the organisation treats social media as new channels to reach, rather than engage, fashion publics.

Online communication is used predominantly for promotional purposes and to drive sales. This use of social media corresponds with Macnamara's (2010) findings and reinforces the convergence between public relations and marketing roles. In contrast, interview participants perceived social media empowers fashion publics, recognising the capacity of consumers to share their thoughts about a brand can be powerful. Anna said:

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

Caitlyn agreed that social media has created a power shift in favour of fashion publics: "It's bringing the consumers closer to the brands, as displayed during RAFEW [Rosemount Australian Fashion Week]. An everyday Australian could feel like they were front row simply by logging onto Twitter." Eva suggested social media has created a more reciprocal relationship between client and consumer: "You're now able to engage people that are actually really interested in

engaging with you and they can talk back to you—so it's not just a one-way conversation anymore, it's two-way.”

In contrast to the organisation's social media use, interview participants' comments suggest fashion publics are viewed as autonomous in that they control how they engage with online brands, rather than being the target of promotional campaigns. These responses do not imply that social media is used solely to generate sales. Rather than embracing social media to contribute to marketing objectives, participants seek to meaningfully engage fashion publics. This finding suggests participants distinguish between public relations and marketing functions, as they perceive public relations through social media is not functioning solely to support marketing efforts but rather fashion PR aims, that is, to achieve an ongoing dialogic engagement with fashion publics. For example, Caitlyn said her role involves “telling the stories” of clients to the media and public in an “exciting and engaging way.” However, all participants except for Caitlyn perceived fashion PR to be part of the marketing mix, observing fashion PR was a more cost effective and localised option, if somewhat ambiguous and unstructured in its results in comparison with sales and marketing (Cassidy & Fitch, 2013). For these participants, there was not a clear distinction in their fashion PR activity between public relations and marketing. According to Anna, whose job title is Public Relations and Marketing Manager: “I'm not doing marketing one day and publicity the next. They blend with each other.

Working with bloggers

Analysis of participant responses suggests in-house blogs are not yet a prominent fashion PR activity. However, Dana reiterated the growing importance of working with fashion and lifestyle bloggers, suggesting she treats certain bloggers in the same regard as fashion editors:

I don't have time to talk to every blogger ... but we look for those that have some sort of credibility about them and we work with those directly and we have a relationship with them as we would with someone from a newspaper.

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

This study is unique in its investigation of social media use in Australian fashion PR. Drawing on practitioner perceptions and an ethnographic study, it offers new insights into public relations activity in niche sectors. The first insight suggests fashion PR practitioners have embraced social media; however it may be used to drive sales and increase revenue rather than to actively engage and interact with fashion publics. As such, it is difficult to distinguish between marketing and public relations functions. The second insight emerging from the findings reported in this study,

and confirming Noricks' (2012) suggestion, is that fashion PR activity is transforming in response to social media; its focus is less exclusively media relations, as practitioners are increasingly responsible for communicating with fashion publics across multiple social media platforms on behalf of their client or employer. As such, it is unclear when publicity and promotion become engagement and dialogue, suggesting dominant understandings of public relations may not adequately reflect contemporary public relations activity across diverse sectors. The third insight is the changing perceptions of publics; interview participants viewed publics as autonomous social media users who followed their own interests rather than as passive recipients of brand messages. This insight suggests traditional public relations concepts such as target publics are no longer relevant. The final insight is the significance of social media for the fashion industry: fashion publics increasingly experience fashion through blogs, tweets, digital fashion shows and a range of social media platforms, as well as through online shopping. As such, social media is integral to fashion PR in a declining, and indeed challenging, market.

The research reported in this paper suggests that social media use in fashion PR offers significant insights into broader understandings of public relations activity and the impact of social media on communication practice. Distinctions between promotion, publicity and public relations are difficult to sustain in a social media environment. Investigating public relations activity in a niche sector, the Australian fashion industry, provides a unique contribution to the public relations body of knowledge, informing new understandings of public relations in a networked world. More research is needed to investigate the impact of social media on the day-to-day activities of public relations practitioners across different sectors.

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