
“Parties, air-kissing and long boozy lunches”? Public relations in the Australian fashion industry

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Abstract

There has been limited research into fashion public relations. This study explores public relations in the Australian fashion industry using ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews with six fashion public relations practitioners. The findings suggest fashion public relations does not easily fit into mainstream understandings of public relations. Rather, fashion public relations is assigned a low status due to its close association with marketing, promotion and publicity and popular representations of the fashion sector as glamorous and superficial. Despite this, participants perceived their work to be professional, where the dominant activities of media relations, celebrity endorsement, and relationship management form part of a carefully devised strategic plan to meet organisational and client objectives. The findings offer an alternative perspective on public relations by considering practitioner experiences in a niche industry field. The study provides new understandings of public relations and calls for a reconceptualisation of the field beyond the narrow remit of mainstream public relations definitions and professional associations.

Introduction

Fashion public relations is popularly perceived to be frivolous, glamorous and primarily image management and promotion. As such, it is rarely embraced in mainstream public relations scholarship, where the dominant paradigm constructs public relations as a management function operating in a corporate environment (L’Etang, 2008). This study explores public relations in the Australian fashion industry. It offers an alternative perspective on public relations by

considering practitioner experiences in a niche industry sector. As such, it mirrors research in other niche sectors such as sport, health and tourism, which aims “to map the apparent role and scope of public relations activities” (L’Etang, 2006, p. 241).

Drawing on Abbott (1988), this study investigates the day-to-day activities of fashion public relations practitioners, where fashion public relations refers to the public relations’ role in managing fashion labels or brands, rather than celebrity or model management. Using ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to “understand the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live and work in it” (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 12). It addresses calls for more ethnographic research in public relations (Hodges, 2006) and for the full realm of public relations activities, beyond a corporate or management function, to be considered (McKie & Munshi, 2007).

The fashion industry

Once estimated to be an AU\$14 billion industry (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2008), the global financial crisis, liberalised trade agreements, demand for European luxury brands, and the evolution of online retailing (Kellock, 2010) have contributed to a decline in revenue for the Australian fashion industry (IBISWorld, 2013). In 2013, total revenue for the Australian fashion industry was predicted to fall to AU\$12.2 billion with minimal growth over the next five years (IBISWorld, 2013). In 2012, the textile, clothing and footwear, along with the retail and wholesale, sectors, saw 1,600 jobs lost due to the closure of 569 fashion and footwear stores across Australia (IBISWorld, 2013). There are still, however,

some strong performing sectors. Industry events, including fashion weeks, trade shows, and more consumer-focused fashion festivals (such as L’Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival and Mercedes-Benz Sydney Fashion Festival) are held annually to promote Australian fashion domestically and internationally. The biannual Rosemount Australian Fashion Week (RAFW) showcases more than 150 designer collections to an industry-only audience of buyers, media and industry influencers (Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2008; Weller, 2008; RAFW, 2011). In 2005, Australian Fashion Week generated AU\$12.5 million value in domestic media coverage and AU\$7.5 million value in international coverage (Breen-Burns, 2005).

Nevertheless, stereotypes of glamour and frivolity, particularly through movies and television series, dominate the industry. For example, the movie *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006) highlights the usual clichés: image-obsessed, backstabbing colleagues donning the latest designer wear; extreme dieting; and glamorous, boozy parties. Like public relations, the fashion industry is a highly feminised field with a low occupational standing (McRobbie, 1998; Noricks, 2006; Fitch & Third, 2010). There is a lack of “a strong critical tradition of research and scholarship in fashion” (McRobbie, 1998, p. 53) despite studies that have explored the fashion industry from cultural (Wilson, 1985; Barnard, 1996), sociological (Simmel, 1957; Blumer, 1969), anthropological (Hansen, 2004), economic (Nystrom, 1928; Sombart, 1967), consumer behaviour (O’Cass, 2000), marketing (Bohdanowicz & Clamp, 1994; Jackson & Shaw, 2009; Lea-Greenwood, 2009), gender (McRobbie, 1998) and political economy (van Acker, 2001) perspectives. Despite these diverse studies suggesting fashion might be a significant sector for research, the fashion industry is still perceived as “quintessentially frivolous” (Church Gibson, 2006, p. 21). Although some of these studies encompass fashion marketing, the academic research specifically on fashion public relations is limited.

Public relations in fashion

Fashion public relations can be traced back to 1954 in Paris when, despite a ban on fashion advertising in the media, Australian Donald (Percy) Savage arranged for Elizabeth Taylor to be photographed at a film premiere wearing a Lanvin dress, resulting in widespread publicity and pioneering photo opportunities of celebrities endorsing designer collections (Cuthbert, 2008; *The Telegraph*, 2008). Savage commented:

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. (cited in Cuthbert, 2008, par. 7)

Savage, therefore, perceived fashion public relations as a cheap promotional tool primarily involving media relations.

L’Etang (2008) acknowledges fashion public relations as a niche sector for public relations activity; however, her reference to “throwing a party” suggests fashion public relations is a frivolous field (p. 19). Two masters-level theses investigate fashion public relations in the U.S. and New Zealand. Noricks (2006), in *From style to strategy: An exploratory investigation of public relations practice in the fashion industry*, calls for more research into diverse public relations activities and a re-evaluation of the ‘craft’ versus ‘professional’ distinction. In her thesis *Communicating identities: New Zealand fashion designers and creative exports*, Beattie (2009) analyses public relations strategies used by fashion designers to promote a unique identity in domestic and international markets. There are no scholarly books specifically on fashion public relations, although there are various ‘how to’ guides for emerging fashion designers, which emphasise awareness-raising and increasing sales (Sheikh, 2009; Folder, 2011); books on how to break into fashion public relations (Noricks, 2012) and a U.S. textbook by Sherman and Perlman (2010). However, in *Fashion marketing: Contemporary issues*, Hines and Bruce (2007) discuss multiple concepts directly related to fashion public relations, such as corporate

identity, website communication, fashion e-tailing, and branding strategies, although the term fashion public relations is not used.

Fashion industry books generally describe fashion public relations as a support function of marketing. In line with the fourth P of the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion), Lea-Greenwood (2009) and Sherman and Perlman (2010) label fashion public relations as primarily promotional activity. Haid, Jackson and Shaw (2006) and Jackson and Shaw (2009) present fashion public relations as a communication tool used to achieve overall marketing objectives. Bohdanowicz and Clamp (1994) and Costantino (1998) argue that there is a clear distinction between fashion public relations and fashion marketing, but fashion public relations should still function to support marketing. 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.

Given the limited scholarship, it is not surprising to find few definitions of fashion public relations beyond an understanding of a role in fashion marketing. Winters and Goodman (1978) suggest fashion public relations is a publicity activity “used to create favorable public opinion about a firm” (pp. 149–150). Noricks (2006) concluded “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” (p. 48). Sherman and Perlman (2010) define fashion public relations 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” (p. xix). The course outline for a three-year bachelor degree in fashion public relations in the UK covers: “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” (London College of Fashion, 2011, par. 1). However, a recently introduced bachelor-degree in fashion business in Australia offers a unit in “Marketing, communications and promotion for fashion” rather than fashion public relations (Melbourne School of Fashion, [2012]), suggesting an overlap or even convergence between these activities.

A review of six texts with references to ‘fashion public relations’ found the terms ‘publicity’ and ‘promotion’ were prominent, along with maintaining brand image and building relationships between fashion organisations and publics, usually through the media (Bohdanowicz & Clamp, 1994; Costantino, 1998; DeVries, 1998; Haid, Jackson & Shaw, 2006; Jackson & Shaw, 2009; Lea-Greenwood, 2009). Only one reference was made to two-way communication (Bohdanowicz & Clamp, 1994) and the term management was not used, suggesting little engagement with the dominant paradigm for public relations. In all texts, however, media relations appeared to dominate understandings of fashion public relations. A reciprocal relationship was noted between fashion brands and the media, as fashion events generate content that fills magazines, newspaper columns and television news (Ohmann, 1996; Weller, 2008) and “fashion PRs need media coverage to communicate with their brands’ consumers” (Jackson & Shaw, 2009, p. 187).

Fashion public relations and ‘the dominant paradigm’

Much public relations theory is framed by the dominant paradigm, which developed out of U.S. practice-led studies (Pieczka, 2006). Research into gendered management and technical roles in public relations serves to delineate strategic public relations as the higher status, professional activity and to suppress its association with marketing, promotion and propaganda (L’Etang, 2008; Fitch & Third, 2010). The consequences are a focus on public relations activity in corporate and government sectors and as a strategic management function (McKie & Munshi, 2007), and an absence of

critical scholarship around such practices (L'Etang, 2008). As such, public relations literature tends to focus on the need for research, evaluation and strategic planning to reinforce the strategic, management orientation of public relations (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006; McDonald & Hebbani, 2011). Similarly, professional associations, such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), embrace understandings of public relations that rely on a normative conceptualisation of what public relations should be, excluding public relations activity, which does not fit this ideal (Gordon, 1997).

The limited literature on fashion public relations suggests research and planning ensure a successful fashion campaign (DeVries, 1998; Noricks, 2006, 2010; Sherman & Perlman, 2010). Noricks (2010) advocates collecting data relevant to consumer purchasing behaviour as well as information on emerging fashion trends to help determine a campaign's target public. With regard to measurement, "further research is needed to determine if and how fashion public relations practitioners engage in evaluation" (Noricks 2006, p. 58). The strategic use of public relations in the fashion industry is illustrated through Swann's (2010) public relations case study on Payless ShoeSource's brand repositioning exercise; research revealed customers wanted affordable and on-trend fashions and the company implemented a four-year public relations campaign (2001–2004) focusing on fashion influencers (fashion media, fashion events, celebrity endorsement, and the designer community). In 2004, the public relations efforts resulted in 826 media mentions and an estimated US\$6.4 million in advertising value equivalency (AVEs)¹. This case study highlights, however, the blurring between public relations and marketing activity in the fashion industry. In this case study, public relations appears to be

understood primarily as publicity and relationship management.

Research design

Abbott's (1998) work on professions highlights the need to study professional work in terms of its day-to-day practice. This study uses ethnographic inquiry and semi-structured interviews to investigate practitioner perceptions of their use of public relations in the Australian fashion industry. The research questions are:

- What are the day-to-day activities of fashion public relations practitioners?
- How do fashion public relations practitioners perceive these activities in relation to public relations?

The qualitative approach is used to understand fashion public relations in terms of the day-to-day activities and experiences of fashion public relations practitioners, rather than interpreting fashion public relations through mainstream understandings of what constitutes public relations. The researcher's university granted ethics approval for this project.

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 perceptions, values, attitudes, routine activities, interactions and experiences of fashion public relations practitioners (Creswell, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Crotty, 1998; 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 weekly journal entries.

Interviews were conducted in June, July and August 2011 with public relations practitioners working in the fashion sector in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. Potential interviewees were identified using internet searches and through

¹ Although a commonly used method for measuring the value of public relations activity, professional associations and some industry commentators consider AVEs unethical and do not recognise AVEs as a reliable or valid method of evaluation (Macnamara, 2006; O'Dwyer, 2010).

Table 1: Research participants

Participants	Job title	In-house vs agency roles	Location
Anna	Marketing and publicity manager	In-house, international luxury women's wear retailer	Melbourne
Bethany	Managing director	Fashion, lifestyle & events PR agency	Melbourne
Caitlyn	Director	Fashion & lifestyle PR agency	Sydney
Dana	Director	Fashion PR agency	Sydney
Eva	Director	Fashion, beauty & lifestyle PR agency	Sydney
Flynn	Brand manager	In-house, designer	Perth

the researchers' professional networks. Ten potential participants 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 interviews were conducted face-to-face and two via email. Table 1 identifies the participants by role and location, but pseudonyms have been assigned to ensure anonymity. All participants possess higher education qualifications in fashion, public relations or marketing communications.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of fashion public relations from the practitioner perspective, using open-ended questions about experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge and background (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Patton, 2002; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Participants had the opportunity to review the interview transcripts, and make additional comments.

The fieldnotes and journal entries and the 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 and concepts, which are used to discuss the findings in the following section. These themes include: perceptions of fashion public relations; fashion public relations activity; public relations and marketing; fashion public relations as strategic public relations; and professionalism and fashion public relations.

Scope and limitations

This study aims to provide rich insights into fashion public relations from the perspective of practitioners, and a large sample could potentially reduce the depth and richness of the findings (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Grunig, 2008). Nonetheless, the low number of interview participants, with half the sample based in Sydney and only one male participant, may have impacted the breadth of knowledge and insights gained. In addition, the researcher's subjectivity must be acknowledged as the researcher conducting the interviews has worked part-time in a retail role in the fashion industry for five years.

Findings and discussion

Perceptions of fashion public relations

Most interview participants acknowledged that fashion public relations is wrongly 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.

However, most participants were not overly

concerned with these stereotypes. The researcher recorded in their journal on the first day of work:

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!

The researcher noted long hours, busy days, skipped lunch breaks and ad hoc duties in their field notes.

Participants defined fashion public relations using terms such as communication, publics and media, broadly suggesting their role is to communicate information about a client's product or brand to publics through the media. Flynn commented: "To explain to people what I do in a nutshell, I would say I liaise with the media to promote the brand." 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 involves "telling the stories" of clients to the media and public in an "exciting and engaging way".

An analysis of the researcher's journal found the role of public relations in the organisation was to boost sales by promoting the organisation and its brands, primarily through media relations; consumer-focused events; and celebrity endorsement. However, the public relations and events manager suggested the organisation's management did not understand public relations, using the example of her job title, which had changed from 'publicity manager' to 'promotions manager' to its current title of 'public relations and events manager' with no real change in the role.

Fashion public relations activity

Analysis of fieldnotes and interviews suggested the organisation's fashion public relations activity fell into three broad categories: media relations; celebrity endorsement; and relationship management. Acknowledging the researcher worked in an assistant position, administrative tasks took up much of their time:

preparing spreadsheets for clothing and accessories used in editorials, fashion parades, events and photo shoots; updating media contact lists; script-writing for MCs and public announcements; managing incoming and outgoing public relations loans; invoicing; organising drycleaning; and steaming stock.

Media relations is a significant component of fashion public relations. Writing press releases, scheduling media interviews and photo opportunities for brand ambassadors and designers, pitching story ideas to the media, organising public relations loans, providing credits for clothing and products used in editorials and photo shoots, and, ultimately, promoting the organisation's brands to fashion editors occurred daily during the ethnographic research. Interview participants identified writing media releases, pitching stories to the media, and sending product to fashion editors for photo shoots and editorial features as important activities; they highlighted the importance of understanding "what editors want" and "knowing your media...to customise your pitch to suit their style/angle" (Bethany).

Celebrity endorsement, that is, the use of local socialites, media personalities, brand ambassadors and occasionally international celebrities for in-house and external fashion events, photo shoots, and media opportunities, was extensively used by the organisation's public relations and events department, and considered useful in generating profits and publicity. For example, a relaunch event celebrating the refurbishment of one of the retailer's stores featured a brand ambassador and attracted 15,000 people (as per footfall count) to the store as well as extensive media coverage. In addition, an exclusive photo shoot of another brand ambassador was the top story on the homepage of a major newspaper's website. Although interview participants acknowledged celebrity endorsement as a potentially valuable promotional tactic, they did not rate it as highly as the organisation did. According to Dana:

I wouldn't say it [celebrity endorsement]'s 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.

Anna agreed: celebrity endorsement "is important but it's certainly not one of our most valued strategies".

Managing relationships with clients, the media, stylists, consumers and retailers, suppliers, brand affiliates, and staff was identified as another significant activity in fashion public relations. A 'give-and-take' approach was used in the organisation 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. The public relations loans played a particularly important role in the organisation's relationship with the media. The public relations and events manager commented that they are a good way of forming reciprocal relationships with fashion editors. Dana suggested that managing relationships in fashion public relations was 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].

Reinforcing Dana's comment, participants discussed the importance of constantly being in touch with the media. Telephone calls, emails, regular showroom appointments, and social networking platforms such as Twitter were all mentioned as tools for maintaining regular contact with journalists. 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 perceived professionalism in her field as stemming from

"being personable". Bethany believed "delivering what you say you will deliver, when you say you will deliver it" was vital for maintaining effective media relationships. Participants' perceptions confirmed research findings suggesting public relations practitioners often view professionalism as personality-driven and client-focused (van Ruler, 2005).

Public relations and marketing

Just as occurs in the literature, the ethnographic research revealed a blurring of boundaries between public relations and marketing. Assisting on a photo shoot, the researcher was informed the aim was to promote the organisation's exclusive brands and entice customers to purchase what the model was wearing. The organisation's use of public relations as a promotional tool to drive sales likens it to the fourth P (promotion) of the marketing mix (Borden, 1984; Johnston & Zawawi, 2009). This observation is reinforced by the organisational structure, where the public relations and events department is part of the marketing and brand development division, which encompasses the organisation's advertising, visual merchandising and public relations and events departments. The state-based public relations and events managers are answerable to the national marketing division, but not to the corporate communications department, which is managed by the human resources division.

All participants except for Caitlyn perceived fashion public relations to be part of the marketing mix. However several participants noted public relations might be the only financially viable option for upcoming and smaller fashion labels. As Eva put it:

Fashion PR is very valuable because it is one of the only ways to promote your brand cost-effectively...[our work is] 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 the use of marketing (rather than public relations) in her agency depended on the brand and the budget. In-house

practitioners, Anna and Flynn, said they performed dual roles of marketing and public relations. Anna suggested marketing was concerned with “overall brand strategy on a global perspective” in comparison to public relations which was “more localised”, possibly suggesting she perceived public relations focused on engaging local target publics. When asked if it was difficult to separate their 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.

These findings suggest significant overlaps between public relations and marketing activity. However, public relations, particularly the use of social media and media relations, was perceived as a cheaper alternative for brands, which do not have a budget for marketing and advertising campaigns.

Fashion public relations as strategic public relations

Participants explained the process they used to plan, implement and evaluate fashion campaigns. They emphasised the necessity of strategic approaches, which ensured longevity of the fashion label and appropriate publicity. Flynn suggested an adaptive strategy was needed due to the fashion industry's dynamic context.

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.

Anna also conveyed the importance of strategic campaigns:

I am 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.

Dana suggested both strategic planning and reactive day-to-day planning were necessary: “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 was 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 confirmed fashion public relations is not just publicity and promotion; rather there is a need for well-researched public relations strategies to support business goals and address particular contexts. In particular, agency participants acknowledged the importance of developing strategies out of an analysis of clients' needs. Dana said her agency avoided a “blanket approach” to campaigns. Similarly, Caitlyn explained “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”.

Participants relied on research and analysis to inform their public relations strategies. Anna identified accounting for budgets, analysing

readership and circulation data, 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 analysed the current economic situation of the location for the proposed campaign, as well as the success of previous campaigns. Participants, therefore, perceived their work as strategic, in that it involved research and planning.

Participants felt a responsibility to stay abreast of industry and consumer trends. Industry trade publication *Rag Trader* was the most popular. Other publications included *Drapers*, *Marie Claire*, *InStyle Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Grazia*, and *B&T*, along with state and national newspapers. Similarly, the organisation's public relations and events team kept up to date with industry news and trends through: local and state-based newspapers, style publications such as *iShoperth*, *Scoop Magazine*, *Fashion Journal*, *Candy Magazine* and *Sheila Magazine*, and online websites including *The Fashion Catalyst* and *Social Diary*. There are several references in the researcher's journal detailing the importance of fashion public relations practitioners immersing themselves in fashion culture:

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

The need to keep informed of industry trends suggested fashion public relations practitioners must gain in-depth knowledge of the entire fashion sector to successfully plan a campaign.

Participants found evaluation challenging, describing the fashion public relations process as "ambiguous" (Anna) and "not measurable" (Eva). Evaluation reports and media clippings were used in the organisation. Participants also used these methods, along with key

performance indicators such as analysing the sell-through performance of products in store, measuring the outcome of the campaign against the initial objectives and calculating the financial value of media coverage. Dana suggested the method of evaluation depended on the client:

A lot of our designers don't actually want that [written reports], 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.

The organisation's public relations and events manager acknowledged that although formal evaluation reports, providing an overview in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; media coverage; and public feedback were useful, evaluation was often neglected due to lack of time. The researcher observed footfall counts and profit gains were used to evaluate the success of in-store events.

Professionalism and fashion public relations

At the time of data collection, none of the participants were current members of the PRIA as they did not consider the PRIA relevant to fashion public relations. Eva remarked "obviously their reach isn't very relevant or it's not targeted enough". Similarly, the public relations and events manager explained she terminated her PRIA membership as it failed to provide any training or professional development programmes for her speciality. She suggested university public relations courses teach a "one-size-fits-all-approach", often with a heavy focus on corporate and government sectors. She said public relations practices outside these sectors were considered "fluff". This conversation suggested the low or marginal status of the fashion public relations speciality within mainstream public relations. In addition, the researcher noted a conversation where the public relations and events manager stated strategies and plans taught at university were not practical as fashion public relations practitioners do not have time to formulate comprehensive public relations strategies.

Rather, she said, fashion public relations requires day-to-day and ad hoc planning. This perception contrasts with those of interview participants who acknowledged the need for both long-term planning and adaptive strategies.

Conclusion

This study investigated public relations in the Australian fashion industry through an analysis of researcher observations and practitioner perceptions and experiences. The ethnographic study and participant responses suggest fashion public relations is a dynamic field requiring long-term, adaptive and reactive strategies to meet organisational and client needs. There is significant overlap between public relations and marketing. Media relations, celebrity endorsement, and relationship management are the dominant activities of fashion public relations, as part of a carefully researched, planned, and monitored strategy. However, evaluation methods for fashion campaigns appeared to be inconsistent.

Participants perceived fashion public relations to be a profession, particularly where 'professional' means working to meet the goals and objectives of their client or employer. Participants did not perceive membership or activities of the PRIA to be relevant for their field, perceiving its focus to be corporate or government public relations. These findings confirm the low status of the fashion public relations specialty in relation to mainstream public relations, primarily due to its close association with marketing, promotion and publicity and popular representations of the fashion sector as glamorous and superficial. That is, the professionalisation drive of public relations results in the framing of public relations as a strategic management function, and, in tandem, the marginalisation of fashion public relations. Yet, the findings presented here suggest that fashion public relations is – at least from participants' perspectives – strategic in that it involves research and planning to meet long-term organisational goals. As such, distinctions in public relations between technical and strategic activity, and indeed,

between marketing and public relations, appear difficult to sustain.

Overall, this research has contributed to a deeper understanding of public relations by examining the work performed and practitioner perspectives in the Australian fashion industry. It challenges mainstream and normative understandings of public relations, which promote the field as a strategic management practice and exclude promotional and technical activity from those understandings. This research exposes the weak boundaries between public relations and marketing, as participants described their work as a combination of both fields. Exploring public relations in a niche sector provides a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge, informing understandings of public relations as a more diverse practice than the literature presents (L'Etang, 2006; McKie & Munshi, 2007) and suggesting the dominant paradigm is inadequate. The findings of this study suggest the need for more critical research into diverse public relations activity. It calls for a reconceptualisation of public relations in terms of the work performed, and beyond the narrow remit of professional associations such as the PRIA. Indeed, the findings point to the possibility that public relations is not a unique occupation, and in practice shares considerable common ground with marketing. More research into day-to-day public relations activity may allow public relations to escape the normative drive of the dominant paradigm and develop new understandings for the field.

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