Negotiation between Fashion Marketers and Journalists in Asia

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Abstract
The article investigates how global fashion, beauty and luxury industries and Hong Kong print media business appropriate, negotiate and re-create the meaning of ‘fashion’ and its vicissitudes in and through the encoding and channel stages of marketing communication. The researcher applied interdisciplinary theories on marketing, media, culture and communication studies. As participant observation peculiar to Hong Kong/Asian fashion industry has not been done before, the research provides original, updated insights to the ecosystem of Asian fashion marketing and journalism, also the practicality of Western fashion theories in Asia. Primary research data were acquired through participant observation in the renowned Chinese fashion magazine MILK X Monthly (Summer 2011), and through which interviews with 16 out of the 55 invited veteran Asia-Pacific fashion marketers were facilitated. How the fashion marketers and editors prioritize and represent various fashion brands as ‘luxury/street fashion’ via the bricolage of textual and visual signs in the editorial production process under various internal and external influences were scrutinized. The results indicate that the consensual censorship of editorial content and pagination derived from economic factors prevails in MILK X Monthly; the pros of having the same fashion marketer handling both advertising and public relations; and the cons of fashion corporate guidelines to external communication and media relations building in Asia-pacific context. It also demonstrates the unobserved parts of fashion communication in local context upon which future research on other fashion media can be built.

Keywords: Fashion marketing, Fashion communication, Fashion Magazine, Media pitching, Hong Kong, Greater China

Introduction
Because of the rapid economic growth of mainland China and Chinese consumption power, Hong Kong has also become an internationally important spot for marketing and business development. More and more luxury brands have their flagship stores launched in the Greater China market, or to overtake their originally franchised stores/authorized business license from the Asian-based multi-label distributors who once helped the brands to develop their local/regional awareness and likeness to a
mature stage, and run their own directly operated stores. Overall, what these fashion corporates sell is to a very large extent not the physical product but augmented fashion brand values nurtured in the target consumers’ mind by the ongoing marketing communications (Lea-Greenwood, 2013). To maintain this fashion value is in a way much more complex than other product categories. The notion of ‘fashion’ is fabricated from texts and images; selling fashion products means creating a specific psychological perception of fashion. However, ‘fashion’ is never a stable quality but keeps morphing and self-evolving in the market and society under the influence of what is usually called ‘fashion trend’. The communication of fashion is not based on a one-way communication, but a semiotic/symbolic mode, meanings are mutually created and interpreted. On the one hand it seems that the sender can control the meanings, on the other hand, in the encoding and channel stage, it always involves a great deal of subjective interpretation, negotiation, projection, as well as consensual alternation and appropriation in fabricating the ‘fashion’ message, which is what the author tries to portray clearly in this paper.

To distinguish the very exclusive aspects of fashion marketing from other forms of marketing one should first explore the seemingly unbounded possibilities of ‘fashion’. Instead of asking “what is fashion?”, it seems that “what could fashion possibly be?” would be a more appropriate question. Its meaning varies in and through different contexts. To recapitulate the key understandings of fashion discussed in the literature review, some define it based on its physical facets—garments, shoes, accessories, cosmetics, jewelries, fragrance and other affiliated items (Barnard, 2007) —whereas others comprehend it from the psychological perspectives, viewing fashion as an intangible thought or a signifier of ‘newness and modernity’ (Barnard, 2007: 7).

“[Modern fashion] sits on the bedrock of nineteenth-century commercial relation, urbanization and technological developments, and the impact of these upon sensibilities” (Evans, 2003: 9). Immanuel Kant once said that “novelty makes fashion alluring”, highlighting the ‘new’ as an essential trait of fashion (Svendsen, 2006). Ulrich Lehmann has explained that the etymology of the French word for ‘fashion’, mode, is the root of ‘modernity’ in French: modernité (Lehmann, 2000). Apart from exemplifying the modern, the novel, the voguish, the vicissitudes of fashion can be infinite and ever-changing. That is also why fashion branding cannot simply rely on a formulaic, stable set of core values as McDonald’s does with its ‘happiness and love’. Cyclically shifting global fashion trends require changing to adapt to new ‘trends’ while remaining true to a brand’s core identity. Indeed, this interplay of internal brand value and external fashion trends significantly the process of fashion marketing communication.

When fashion is associated with the body, it speaks of one’s facial shape and features, the hues of one’s skin, the particular silhouette and proportion of the torso, hair style and color, and so forth. Fashion attempts to project stimuli akin to those of architecture and interior design, lighting, musical arrangement and video projection. Ways of speaking, posture walk, dancing and performing similarly express aspects of fashion sense. These interlocking aspects complicate the fashion marketing process—creating the advertising visuals, for example, or organizing fashion events or producing promotional materials. Delivering the right juxtapositions of visuals and text to the right audience is to some extent an art in itself.
High fashion clothing brands often use their chief designers as their presenters. Marc Jacobs of Louis Vuitton and Karl Lagerfeld of Chanel are well-known examples. These chief designers wield the power of creativity throughout the marketing communication process, and regional advertising agencies, especially in places like Hong Kong, can hardly play a significant role in art direction during the encoding process. Rather, they must simply adapt the print advertisements and visuals assigned by the creative directors at the client’s headquarters, slightly adjusting the informational elements such as shop addresses and contact numbers. The regional agencies are usually closely monitored by the global communication team when preparing for a PR event, with central approval of the production contractors, venues, spatial designs, celebrity endorsers, guests and media partners.

Despite this central control, fashion communication, even out in the provinces, is a distinct form of multiple-message communication. Roland Barthes (1990), in his book *The Fashion System*, applied Saussurian semiology to evaluate the meanings signified by the visuals and text of the print media of his time. He tried to separate denotation from connotation, as the media offered artificial and arbitrary tips on ‘what’ fashion to communicate and ‘how’ to communicate it. Barthes treated these fashion tips as purely random, meaningless and even conspiratorial fashion marketing strategies, but even in Barthes’ terms fashion communication is still not a one-way, linear mode of communication. A fashionable item, say a handbag, is never naturally destined to convey a particular anticipated meaning—‘sumptuous’, for example, or ‘elegant’ or ‘exquisite’. Rather, fashion companies use mass media to nurture and sustain the meanings they want their products to signify. This is the power of fashion branding.

However, such messages are neither explicitly nor literally delivered. Fashion is not linguistic but semiotic. In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard considers the message sender/receiver dichotomy and the idea of fashion from the viewpoint of the ‘process’ school of communication, “…[a] group of people, a society, a culture, should be defined as ‘people in communication’” (Barnard, 1996: 29). To Barnard, the designers, wearers and observers of fashion items, can never be the only genuine senders of fashion messages. The fashion marketers and the fashion gatekeepers of the media also play a less obvious but crucial role. There is always discrepancy between the intended and perceived meanings of a fashion item, as the perceptions are the result of a constantly shifting negotiation influenced by cultural differences related to the sender’s and the receiver’s social and organizational status, class, gender, ethnicity and so forth (Barnard, 1996). Indeed, the negotiation itself is one constituent of the cultural/social community. Barnard advocates that fashion can be the ‘fabric’ of culture, generating meanings that produce and solidify various cultural groups within the structure of their power relations (Barnard, 1996). Barnard’s ideas are thus an appropriate lens for examining to what extent and how fashion meanings shift from designers to marketers, from marketers to media gatekeepers, from media gatekeepers to readers/consumers, and even from consumers to those they seek to impress. All negotiate meanings. From a marketing point of view, recognizing the complexity of the interplay between fashion branding and trends and the multiplicity and fluidity of fashion communication can help a fashion marketer be more tactful in collaborating with the fashion media during the encoding process, even though most marketers can never expect to have complete control of the fashion meanings.

Advertising and public relations are the two forms of communication on which
fashion marketers rely most heavily. Most international fashion brands expect their Asian marketing teams to adapt print advertisements written elsewhere while maintaining a universally coordinated, vivid and distinctive brand image (Lea-Greenwood, 2013). Indeed, for them this is the essence of integrated global marketing. In Hong Kong magazines, locally produced fashion advertisements are rare. Local advertising managers for fashion brands handle mostly media planning and the control of cost, timing, content and distribution. Knowing this, readers assign greater credibility to editorial coverage and third-party endorsements. They become cynical and doubtful about paid advertising, leading to the rising popularity of public relations. Asian fashion marketers especially focus on building good media relations building, so they must understand the characteristics and needs of a market’s key media outlets to pitch credible, favourable and effective media coverage. Even so, no consistent editorial coverage across different media can be anticipated. During fashion media pitching, one of the fashion marketer’s major goals is to align the content of such editorial coverage with the brand’s desired identity and positioning as far as they can. Raising the awareness of the brand and enhancing preference for it over its competitors are normally the goals of Asian fashion publicists. They can only hope that this leads to sales and brand loyalty in the long run—their more marketing-oriented PR objectives.

The encoding process in media pitching is clearly different from that of advertising. Local fashion marketers can offer no creative brief, cannot exert direct control over the production of ad content, cannot demand an exact time of distribution or priority pagination of any coverage. The media organs would regard any attempt to do so as violating their editorial autonomy. Media pitching is thus a negotiation which involves many uncontrolled factors. But since editorial coverage is generally perceived as more credible, fashion marketers still try to generate such messages despite the high degree of uncertainty. Because success can lead to greater influence over attitudes and preferences, which can generate sales for high-involvement fashion products. Nonetheless, many fashion marketers are reticent to pitch for coverage other than marketing-oriented editorial content (creative feature stories, for example) because from their corporate point of view it would not lead directly to product awareness, preference and sales. Indeed, some marketers view such coverage as inappropriate and an inconsistent diffusion of the fashion message which might jeopardize their brand’s carefully coordinated image.

The aim of the study was to elucidate the characteristic negotiation and appropriation of the fashion marketing communication process, and the opportunities, restrictions and difficulties in the fashion media pitching process.

Methodology

In the researcher’s literature review, there are two camps of debating views towards fashion discerned. In the critical Marxist camp, Marx (1967), Veblen (2012) and Barthes (1990) are among those who criticize fashion as a means of economic exploitation, illogical and empty. They believed that the industry actively manipulates fashion trends to fleece the public. Particularly, Barthes (1990) attempted to track down the correlations between the written, the iconic and real clothing and elucidated the tyranny of the fashion media and their notions of fashionability which provoke a straightforward, socially imposed notion of fashion.
In contrast, Jobling (1999), Barnard (1996), Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2008) have more recently tried to go beyond the Marxist perspective, all proposing that fashion has social utility and involves multiple twists in its meanings throughout the complicated encoding and decoding processes. Jobling (1999) highlighted the fashion media as fashion’s mediator, generating its meanings. He insisted that meanings are always conveyed in an implicit and subliminal way, rather than explicitly uttered as “this is fashionable” and “this is unfashionable”. Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2008) draw particular attention to how fashion designers and fashion marketers go hand-in-hand, maintaining commercial success by blending a sense of luxury into the products. In Barnard’s (1996) view, the creator, the mediator and the wearer are all involved in negotiating fashion’s meanings.

Inspired by the above mentioned theoretical resources, the researcher's key research question is, whether fashion is as what Barthes said, purely an arbitrary, preempted message being controlled and imposed according to the preference of fashion marketer; or as Barnard asserted, it is merely negotiated through the process of fashion communication rather than a preexisted notion—Instead of having the fashion message directly encoded by the fashion marketer or by the fashion media, fashion message is appropriated and negotiated between the two on multiple levels in the process of communication beyond the controllable/uncontrollable dichotomy. This may also lead us to acquire further insight of the power politics involved through the communication process.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation, an umbrella term for all of the observation and formal and informal interviewing, is a qualitative research method first practiced by anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing in 1879. It involves a researcher partaking in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as a means of understanding the group’s culture. It offers three advantages: the generation of good quality data from fieldwork; the exposure as a participant improves the quality of the data’s interpretation; and the formulation of new research questions and hypotheses grounded in on-the-scene observation. (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002).

The investigator’s first task is to gain entry to a field site, followed by building rapport and gaining acceptance by the community. This allows him to better interact with the groups and individuals in hopes of collecting beneath-the-surface data. The process of enculturation allows the accumulation of observations of daily routines, specific events, and conversations, all of which must be carefully observed and captured accurately in field notes. Properly done, such observation normally leads to well-defined and specific research questions. (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002).

In this study, participant observation was applied to the work of MILK X Monthly, a monthly fashion magazine published in Hong Kong. Three months of participant observation was arranged with the help of the publication’s fashion editor. The editorial work was observed in detail by attending editorial meetings as well as daily activities such as photo shooting sessions and press events. The researcher contributed to writing one editorial feature during the study period. The level and duration of the participation were considered sufficient to elucidate how the media practitioners at the magazine collaborate, dispute and negotiate. The observations were recorded in
written notes and, for a more accurate visual record, photos were also recorded where it was acceptable and appropriate.

Data reduction involved complete rereading and extensive rewriting during the observation period and afterward. The field notes were arranged chronologically, especially those documenting conversations and discussions on specific occasions. To the extent possible, the exact wording of conversations was recalled, and other non-verbal content like body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, implied meanings and the setting were recorded as well.

**Sample Selection**

According to the updated media kit provided by the senior advertising sales manager, *MILK X Monthly* is a 5-year-old fashion magazine with a print circulation of 50,000 in Hong Kong, 300,000 in mainland China and 20,000 in Taiwan. In the first two weeks of preparing each issue, four editorial feature topics are chosen. In the first issue of the observation period the four topics were ‘Days and Nights of Canton Road’ describing a well-known tourist district in Hong Kong with many international, high-end fashion flagship stores; ‘LVMH’s Visual Merchandizing Aesthetics’, presenting the shop window displays of some fashion brands under the global luxury conglomerate LVMH Moët Hennessy · Louis Vuitton S.A. (the LVMH Group); ‘Interviewing LV Product Connoisseurs’ investigating why and how much Louis Vuitton customers appreciate its products; and ‘Interviews with Asian Fashion Marketers’ (eventually appeared as ‘The Fashion Network’) exploring trends in Asian fashion marketing by interviewing a group of experienced fashion marketing practitioners. The first and third of these topics were regarded as worldly eventually rejected as inconsistent with the high-end image of *MILK X Monthly*. The chief editor also discouraged his staff about the second because he felt the target interviewees would be unable to accept media interviews. Even the last topic was seen by the chief editor as ‘very difficult’.

In the preparation of the fashion network story the researcher participated in formally contacting and interviewing Asia-based fashion marketers on behalf of *MILK X Monthly*. This involved first a list of the fashion brands distributed in Hong Kong by the ‘big three’ of international fashion: the LVMH Group, The Kering Group (ex-PPR S.A. Group), and the Richemont Group. A list of contacts was compiled by reviewing 10 previous issues of *MILK X Monthly* and noting the names of those who had been featured and the advertised brands. This yielded a list of 138 fashion labels for winnowing by the fashion editor and a womenswear fashion reporter. Some were deemed ‘unsuitable’ because, for example, “they are not high-end/luxurious enough for *MILK X Monthly*” or “they’re not popular in Hong Kong”. Then, as the chief editor had predicted, corporate guidelines forbade the marketing staff of many firms from expressing any personal opinions related to the brand to the press, so many brands were eliminated because “they’re not interested in being interviewed”, “they never answer this type of feature interview questions, we tried it before”, “they only do product features and loan-outs, the typical product feature” or “except the Chief Designer or the CEO, all the other staff are never allowed to participate in any kinds of interview according to the brand’s regulations”. In total 83 brands were eliminated, leaving 55.
Data Collection

An invitation email and twelve proposed interview questions were sent to a manager responsible for marketing each of the 55 target brands. The questions were proposed and the interviews were conducted. The chief editor insisted, however, that the editorial feature should not be ‘too academic’, so certain questions were slightly revised before use. Question 8, for example, was revised to “Are you now still interested in travelling to any specific place, and why?” in order to indirectly introduce the readers to the job of a fashion marketer. This involved a negotiation between the interviewer (as a fashion journalist) and the invited interviewees (fashion marketers) to produce an editorial feature rather than thematically coded for analysis.

About half of the 55 brands initially declined to grant an interview. Another 35% of the invited brands did not reply. Only 10% of those contacted proactively counter-proposed other formats for gathering information for the editorial feature, for instance attending their press conferences (Longchamp), joining their sponsored press tour to Paris (Dior Homme) and featuring their products for the next season. The publicists of some well-known brands (including Armani, Gucci and Tod’s) persistently asked which other brands were participating, and when they realized that brands such as Chanel, Celine, Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton and Prada could not participate they turned down the invitation. In addition, the publicists of Armani and Gucci said they did not want their brands to be associated with less ‘classy’ brands such as Diesel, H&M and Vivienne Westwood.

The chief editor instructed that there should be statements from at least one or two top-tier fashion brands in the proposed feature article. Finally, senior communication team representatives from sixteen fashion brands agreed and were allowed to take part in such ‘personal’ interviews in the name of their labels. None of them were as prestigious as the chief editor would have preferred, but he eventually approved carrying out the interviews based on the impact of featuring interviews with sixteen senior fashion marketers at once.

Results

Among the sixteen interviewees, twelve were interviewed by the researcher face-to-face, one was interviewed by email, two were interviewed over the telephone, and one responded both by phone and by email. The first interviews were conducted from July to October of 2011. All interviewees directly and indirectly introduced their brands’ products as fashionable, provided product photos or facilitated product photography. The fashion journalist made the initial judgment of which products to feature or not in a drafted layout. Except one brand’s communication manager again and again bargained with the fashion journalist about placing her senior’s interview in the foremost position (finally rejected by the chief editor), other interviewees and their marketing team members did not attempt to manipulate the junior journalist’s decision of textual/visual content and pagination. Four interviewees (or their marketing team members) did not provide what the fashion journalist requested, such as the product shots of their new collections and one memorable picture, in a timely manner. While passed all the textual and visual elements to the design team, the senior graphic designer rearranged the layout proposed by the junior fashion
journalist, suggested to cut the 8-point-sized textual content short as the “packed
texts would not look good”, sifted through the photos they deemed unsuitable
and unfashionable. The final approval was made by the chief editor. Around 80%
of the textual content created by the researcher remained unchanged. The
feature was published in the November 2011 issue of the magazine. A 24-page
feature interview was produced, featuring the individual photos of respective
fashion marketers, their viewpoints of fashion, the introduction of their affiliated
brands’ and own fashion products. None of the brands and their products was
described as “unfashionable”.

According to Bain & Company’s China Luxury Market Study (2011), the top-ten
brands mainland Chinese consumers desire the most were ranked in the following
sequence: Louis Vuitton; Chanel; Gucci; Christian Dior; Armani; Hermès; Rolex;
Cartier; Prada and Burberry (Bain & Company, 2011). Looking at the store count in
mainland China of selected luxury brand in December 2011, the top-ten are ranked
based on the following sequence: Hugo Boss (114 stores); Armani (104 stores);
Dunhill (104 stores); Bally (69 stores); Salvatore Ferragamo (57 stores); Burberry (56
stores); Ermenegildo Zegna (56 stores); Coach (52); Gucci (45 stores) and Louis
Vuitton (38 stores).

It is interesting that many of the more prominent and aggressively developing
fashion labels turned down the feature interview request. Prada did not reply,
while Rolex and Lancôme were not listed by the MILK X Monthly fashion editor
and reporter. Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior, both in the LVMH Group, rejected
participating in the feature interview, but they were the only two brands that
counter-proposed other collaborative editorial projects which might generate
media coverage better reflecting their own point of view. However, as they went
beyond the scope of and did not fit into the researcher’s proposed feature article,
the researcher courteously turned down their counter-proposals for the time
being.

The non-participating brands’ official responses on the phone and by email
reported in the earlier part indicate that, most international fashion enterprises
adopt a top-down, ‘one-voice’ approach in handling external communications
with the media. Even though the Asia-Pacific region and greater China have
become prominent markets for such firms in recent years, they still tightly
control their dissemination of messages to the media using explicit guidelines
and implicit rules. Their staff and representatives in Asia are only authorized to
facilitate a consistent set of marketing and public relations activities. They favour
advertorial product features, or perhaps email interviews with the CEO and chief
designer over which they can exert a high level of control of the content.
According to the MILK X Monthly editorial staff, product loan-outs are also
common, as they can generate editorial coverage with little chance of deviating
from the brand’s identity and communications objectives. Yet in Asia both the
advertising and public relations roles are often performed by the same publicist.
The same marketer, usually the Communication Manager/Director serves the
media at press lunches and bargains with their advertising sales staff, sometimes
simultaneously (e.g in the case of Hugo Boss). They control the advertising
dollars which sustain a publication, and they are able to use that power in
directly or indirectly pitching for favorable editorial coverage. The qualitative data collected from the participant observation at *MILK X Monthly* seem to support this argument to a great extent.

Positioning within the article was also the subject of negotiation. Eight of the participating brands had regional (Asia-Pacific) communications directors/heads/managers (Fendi, Diesel, Guerlain, Hugo Boss, Loewe, Piaget, Van Cleef & Arpels, and Vivienne Westwood), six had communication managers specialized in Hong Kong and China (Harvey Nichols, I.T. Apparels, Joyce Boutique, Lane Crawford, MCM, and Marc Jacobs) and two had Hong Kong Public Relations managers (Estée Lauder and H&M). In the layout process the chief editor and two designers expressed their concerns about the article’s sequencing. The chief editor vaguely suggested that the more famous fashion brands should be featured near the beginning of the article. Big ad spenders were also perceived as deserving a more prominent position. Joyce Boutique, Lane Crawford, Harvey Nicholas and I.T. Apparel each advertise hundreds of individual fashion labels they carry and have very large advertising budgets as a whole. With local managers, they also polished their interview responses more carefully. On one occasion, a junior designer of *MILK X Monthly* explicitly remarked that, “Those who feed you should get the most prominent position in the editorial coverage.” The Vice President of Joyce Boutique had cancelled several interview appointments, but the senior editor still insisted that an interview with a Joyce Boutique marketer must be done, and in the end it became the foremost interview in the article.

Similarly, the original email interview response from I.T. Apparel’s Communication Manager was comparatively brief, incomplete and sketchy, but again the chief editor insisted that the interview must be re-done and expanded in order to make the entire feature more ‘complete’, and it finally became the fourth interview in the article.

In the magazine feature, the three regional communications directors’ interviews (Van Cleef & Arpels under the Richemont Group, Fendi under the LVMH Group, and Piaget under the Richemont Group), ranking number five, six and seven respectively, received double-page layouts, compared with other interviewees’ one-page coverage.

There were also some minor revisions which convey similar implications. The original double-page coverage of the interview with Hugo Boss’s regional head of communications was cut to one page even though the visual and textual material provided was apparently as aesthetically pleasing and interesting as the other interviews. The chief editor also added introductions of 3 to 5 new products of each brand with descriptive copy and images under each marketer’s interview, resembling a direct-marketing product catalogue. This indirectly emphasized product introduction as the key to the editorial feature, although there were no explicit selection criteria. This suggests that inclusion was a commercial rather than an editorial or aesthetic judgment.

The interviews with two local public relations managers (Estée Lauder and H&M) were located towards the end of the editorial feature, fifteenth and sixteenth respectively. Perhaps coincidentally, those two interviewees were the only ones who were not responsible for making decisions about advertising placements.
Discussions

These results show that in the process of non-paid media pitching, many established global fashion enterprises have explicit guidelines restricting local/Asian fashion marketers from providing any unofficial information about the brand or even personal information to the media. This is presumably to maintain a consistent brand image as well as to avoid unfavorable associations with the brand’s identity. In this case, among the 39 non-participating global fashion brands, only a few actively negotiated with the media gatekeeper and counter-proposed alternative media angles in response to the request for a feature interview; many simply declined with a rejection phone call or email. However, none of their final editorial coverage was negative or deviated from the brands’ images. In fact senior management concern was excessive in this case. Indeed, two participating marketers later actively expressed their gratitude for the positive media coverage. This was not as a consequence of any tight information monitoring within the fashion company, but the editorial judgment system of the magazine. There was a consensual self-censorship scheme at MILK X Monthly. The editorial staff members were in most cases conscious of their influence and of the interests of the magazine’s advertisers. This was a tacit understanding rather than the subject of clear regulations. Whether or not such a system operates at other middle-scale Asia-based fashion titles might be a fruitful topic for further research.

The journalists at MILK X Monthly felt that their editorial freedom and the magazine’s autonomy were much less at a local fashion magazine than at international titles such as Elle, Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue which are often regarded as significant influencers and creators of global fashion trends. Global trend management is crucial for a fashion enterprise in establishing its core brand values and synchronizing their dissemination. On the other hand, such international titles are also more steadily supported by the international fashion brands than local Asian fashion titles like MILK X Monthly. The negotiation dynamics are therefore likely to be significantly different. This too might be the topic of useful future research.

Based on the semi-structured interviews with five MILK X Monthly editorial staff and the discussion among the editorial staff in a monthly topical meeting, they seem to have a great deal of flexibility in deciding their editorial topics, but there are hidden constraints, though journalists can negotiate to a certain extent. In MILK X Monthly’s case, the chief editor asserted in the meeting that their editorial topics and graphical layouts were not creative enough. At the same time, he tended to encourage the editorial team to include product features. In these the fashion journalists can express a more individualistic, mix-and-match aesthetic style, but they must still follow the magazine’s ‘fashion style’ reflecting what it perceives to be the preferences of its target readers. This tends to leave Hong Kong photographers and designers little creative control over photography sessions.

Even on occasions when the fashion editors and reporters think that the products from a brand ‘look ugly’ or ‘are not very wearable’, they still must feature them if the brand is a significant advertiser. They understand that they do not want to irritate their sponsors, the influential communication managers.

All five interviewees mentioned that, the situation of local traditional print media
is becoming more difficult and competitive. In MILK X Monthly’s case, the mass public’s inclination to acquire information online is a key factor in its decreasing circulation. This leads to decreased editorial and creative autonomy and increased control of negotiations by the advertisers. The rise of the fashion businesses in mainland China is also attracting international media conglomerates. This too gives fashion marketers more control of editorial content in their media pitching, but its impact on quality and the target audiences may or may not be improved. As one journalist suggested, “Whether the editorial [content] can be created with high quality also depends on the ‘quality’ of the clients.” In daily conversation the MILK X Monthly employees also indicated that tight schedules, an overly heavy workload and a limited budget for research and photography affected the quality of the editorial content they produced. The more junior journalists, did not seem to consciously consider how readers would perceive and decode and messages encoded in their output. They seemed primarily concerned with diffusing their own interpretations of fashion. They favored descriptive, elaborate, rhetorical phrases to interpret their fashion ideas, though the seasoned editors soon indoctrinated them to bear the advertisers’ interests in mind. ‘Less words, more visuals’ was one common lesson to the junior editorial staff in the formal topical meeting and informal dialogues.

Conclusion

The observations at MILK X Monthly confirm that the process of fashion (marketing) communication frequently involves appropriation and negotiation of meanings. Appropriation about the location of interview, meanings of fashion represented by specific clothing and accessories, the images of designers, celebrities and/or supermodels, other objects as well as spatial arrangement. Negotiation about the priority, suitability and ‘fashionability’ of various textual and visual messages often emphasized economic factors rather than aesthetics. In such negotiations, power relations favor the major advertisers and global fashion conglomerates. Other social, cultural and interpretive factors are involved primarily when fashion marketers and fashion media practitioners negotiate about how best to encode the correct fashion meanings.

In Hong Kong, local fashion marketers have more power than the local fashion media, and the power of global fashion marketers supersedes that of the Asian fashion marketers. International fashion brands, especially the successful ones, try their best to control not only the presentation of their advertising messages but also the editorial content that surrounds them. In the realm of fashion marketing, control may not truly enhance advertising’s overall effectiveness in communicating the right message to the target audiences. It may stifle the more creative editorial approaches. The guidelines limiting fashion communication should be more flexibly interpreted and applied to elicit better cooperation and communication from the fashion media.

Regarding the limitation of this study, as the participant researcher himself is the sole interpreter and coder of the editorial content, his conclusion of the absence of unfavorable presentation of the interviewed brands and their products as “unfashionable” may be somehow subjective. Importantly, the pluralistic ‘fashionability’ has never been a simple and classifiable concept both in the academia
and commercial world. In this light, one may argue whether the postulated self-censorship scheme can operate consistently at MILK X Monthly or other Asian fashion print media in maintaining a favorable communication of fashion meanings without the fashion marketers’ careful monitoring and tactful negotiation. Meanwhile, there could also be other unspecified factors affecting the fashion brands’ willingness to collaborate with MILK X Monthly, such as the prestige, market positioning and perceived fashionability of the fashion publication.

**Implications for Business Marketing Practice**

The participant observations at MILK X Monthly revealed the frequent appropriation and negotiation of meanings in the process of fashion marketing communication. In such negotiations, power relations favor the major advertisers and global fashion conglomerates. Other social, cultural and interpretive factors are involved primarily when fashion marketers and fashion media practitioners negotiate about how best to encode the correct fashion meanings.

The non-participating brands’ official responses on the phone and by email reported indicate that, most international fashion enterprises adopt a top-down, ‘one-voice’ approach in handling external communications with the media. Even though the Asia-Pacific region and greater China have become prominent markets for such firms in recent years, they still tightly control their dissemination of messages to the media using explicit guidelines and implicit rules. Their staff and representatives in Asia are only authorized to facilitate a consistent set of marketing and public relations activities. Many established global fashion enterprises have explicit guidelines restricting local/Asian fashion marketers in the process of non-paid media pitching, to maintain a consistent and coordinated brand image and to avoid unfavorable associations with the brand’s identity—from providing any unofficial information about the brand or even personal information to the media. However, In this case, none of the final editorial coverage was negative or deviated from the brands’ images, as a consensual self-censorship scheme was discerned at MILK X Monthly. The editorial staff members were in most cases conscious of their influence and of the interests of the magazine’s advertisers. This was a tacit understanding rather than the subject of clear regulations. It shows that the senior management’s tight control was somehow excessive. Meanwhile, both the advertising and public relations roles are often performed by the same fashion publicist in the Asia-pacific context. They control the advertising dollars which sustain a publication, and they are able to use that power in directly or indirectly pitching for favorable editorial coverage. The qualitative data collected from the participant observation at MILK X Monthly seem to support this argument to a great extent.

The interviewed editorial staff mentioned, the situation of local traditional print media is becoming more difficult and competitive. In MILK X Monthly’s case, the mass public’s inclination to acquire information online is a key factor in its decreasing circulation. This leads to decreased editorial and creative autonomy and increased control of negotiations by the advertisers. In Hong Kong, local fashion marketers have more power than the local fashion media, and the power of global fashion marketers supersedes that of the Asian fashion marketers. International
fashion brands, especially the successful ones, try their best to control not only the presentation of their advertising messages but also the editorial content that surrounds them. The rise of the fashion businesses in mainland China is also attracting international media conglomerates. This too gives fashion marketers more control of editorial content in their media pitching, but its impact on quality and the target audiences may not be improved. In the realm of fashion marketing, control may not truly enhance advertising’s overall effectiveness in communicating the right message to the target audiences. It may stifle the more creative editorial approaches. The guidelines limiting fashion communication should be more flexibly interpreted and applied to elicit better cooperation and communication from the fashion media.

References


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