The Three Cs of Fashion Media Today: Convergence, Creativity & Control

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Introduction

The history of fashion is intimately tied up with the technologies through which it can be represented, advertised and visualized (Craik 2009: 245)

Fashion is a mechanism of cultural struggle (McNeil 2010: 107)

Over the last decade fashion media has gravitated online, like many other cultural phenomena. This is evident from the fundamental shift in ways that fashion is now mediated, from the twentieth-century staples of runway shows and glossy magazines towards blogs, the moving image and social networking media. Despite the longstanding link between the fashion system and media technologies, though, there has been, as Jennifer Craik notes, "surprisingly little critical analysis of the contours of this relationship" (2009: 246). As such, an interdisciplinary analysis of fashion from a media studies framework is both timely and pertinent. Put simply, the state of contemporary fashion media speaks through (and about) technological convergence, fuelled by an "increasing ability to carry and convert content - sound, data, image or text - into multiple formats" in the digital domain (Cunningham & Turner 2010: 3). A key effect of convergence is the multiplication of media. In new fashion media, for instance, a collection launched by one of the major fashion houses today (like Chanel, Prada or Burberry) will invariably find multiple forms online: streamed as a YouTube runway show; accompanied by a fashion film; promoted via an interactive website, Facebook page, iPhone/iPad app, official blog, Flickr photo gallery and discussed via Twitter. To consider the extensive, and real time, access to a global fashion audience, the scale and extent of this development is striking. The Spring/Summer 2010 collection from the late Alexander McQueen, for instance, was streamed live to a YouTube audience of over 1.5 million viewers, many of whom extended the experience through YouTube commentary, Facebook 'likes', 'shares' and a whirlwind of Tweets. Consistent with other examples of technological convergence, then, fashion media has been transformed into a model of dispersal and fragmentation, in the production, distribution and consumption of content (Cohen, Salazar & Barkat 2009: 357).

This article highlights the main trajectories in fashion media today, and considers how they both affect and encode the distribution of power within the fashion industry. On the one hand, it is argued that certain trends - like the rise of the fashion blog and the boom in fashion film - have changed how even the oldest and most revered fashion houses 'do business'. However, it does not follow that these new digital media flows have been at any expense of any Old World dominance. For Craik, the contemporary fashion system grew from the mass media model of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for which she attributes a "democratization of fashion, opening it up to more and more groups in society and across the globe" (2009: 270). This article expands, and reframes, the question of the democratization of fashion media in the new context of Web 2.0. With the shift online, the push towards more accessible, and diverse modes of fashion media would seem logical, with increased opportunities for interactive, multiplatform and globalised expression. However, the following analysis reveals a twin-pull in new fashion media, between the Web 2.0 newcomers and the fashion establishment. There is a tension, and at times fracture, between the 'opening up' of fashion media via citizen journalism, the blog literati and digital filmmaking; and a multibillion-dollar industry that has coopted new media strategies to sustain its power and primacy. So, for every example of 'independent' or 'authentic' fashion media that speaks to the openness of Web 2.0, there are many more that speak to the exploitation of digital media portals by fashion's elites, and these are managed almost exclusively by the business models of private equity ownership. As such, and in line with Craik's view that "as new media forms have been invented, the fashion industry has been adept at exploiting opportunities to annex its representational possibilities" (Craik 2009: 270), this article frames fashion media as a dynamic set of forms at the nexus of convergence, creativity and control.

The Fashion Blogosphere

This image is from John Galliano's Spring 2010 couture collection for Christian Dior. Specifically, it's from a Grazia
magazine editor whose view from the second row was obscured by a big pink headband.

Succinctly, and perhaps inadvertently, the image points to the massive changes in fashion media over the last five years. The headband belongs to Tavi Gevinson, a fourteen year-old blogger from Chicago, whose online love letters to her designer heroes have made her one of the most closely followed names in fashion today. It is easy to see why Tavi has charmed both the blogosphere and high-end designers like Galliano. She writes with flair, freedom and a tone that is rare in fashion commentary - savvy, but not snobby. Still, until very recently, Tavi was just another average kid in suburban
Chicago. How then can one explain her prime position at one of the most exclusive events in Paris Fashion Week, while editors and executives with decades more experience were relegated to the second or third row?

Tavi is just one of an increasingly powerful and influential group of bloggers whose contribution to the fashion world was, just a few years ago, barely acknowledged in mainstream press - but is now being feted by the likes of John Galliano, Dolce & Gabanna and Marc Jabobs as a formidable intermediary in fashion. In short, these upstarts, ingénues, and amateurs have moved from the margins to the front row, literally. Whether it's Tavi in Chicago, Susie Bubble in London, Tommy Ton in Toronto, Bryan Boy in Manila, Garance Doré in Paris, or her partner The Sartorialist in New York, the most popular fashion bloggers signpost a collective slide away from the Vogue style of fashion commentary (exclusive and aloof) towards a very different vernacular: engaged, chatty, and - until very recently - unaffiliated. They seized the opportunities created by twenty-first century digital media - interactive, globalised, multimodal and fast - and energised a parallel force in fashion media: the online fashion blog.

Figure 2: Front row at D&G, September 2009, from L>R: Bryan Boy, Tommy Ton, Garancé Dore & Scott Schuman

Despite some differences between these blogs - in tone and perspective - collectively, they signal fashion's inevitable but at times uncomfortable encounter with online opportunities. Influence and reach is no longer tied to top-level titles like Vogue, or earned through years of assistance and editing, or secured through social capital. Rather, they made their mark with voices that seemed fresh and autonomous. It's fitting, then, that while the kudos of major fashion press like Vogue came through its exclusive access to couture (König 2006: 211), these bloggers emphasise street style. Their imagery spotlights the eclecticism and diversity of ordinary people, whose outfits are as likely to be vintage, thrift-store or knock-off as up-market, new-season or designer. Ostensibly, there's nothing too subversive about this development: media today empowers all online users with the means to communicate across space and time. Until the last few years, though, one could still perceive an inherent dichotomy in fashion media: there was the world of Vogue - professionalised, glossy and authoritative (David 2006: 13); and there were blogs - DIY, quirky, and alternative. In turn, it was relatively easy to see how each camp offered something different to fashion commentary. The choice was between a view of fashion that was aspirational, airbrushed and thoroughly entwined with an industrial system; and one that was attainable, imperfect and on the (average) street. In just a few years, though, these differences have become less obvious - and the romance of these blogs as independent and organic has been undercut. By way of example, Scott Schuman's blog, The Sartorialist, is especially revealing, and thus warrants closer analysis.
The rise and rise of The Sartorialist reads like a case study in new media democracy. The blog features Schuman's street-style photography, with images of people seemingly on-the-go and effortlessly chic. Having turned his back on the corporate world after September 11, the stay-at-home dad developed a passion for a new hobby: taking amateur photographs of his two young daughters. His foray into fashion photography though began when he started to take candid photographs of 'cool-looking' people in New York, around the Fulton Fish Market, and Bergdorf Goodman. The subsequent blog was born in 2005. Within just two years, it had attracted so much attention that in 2007 Time Magazine deemed Schuman one of the top 100 influential names in style and design, alongside luminaries like Marc Newson, Frank Gehry and Manolo Blahnik. Schuman's blog shows how such sites have diversified how fashion is captured and conveyed; whatever it was that caught his eye, Schuman's sub-text was always the same: beauty in fashion is not confined to the runway or the studio. In this respect, he posits a discursive and economic break from the raison d'être of traditional fashion media. Two images from The Sartorialist in particular show just how radical such blogs can be in their re-definition of style and fashion.

This first image to be considered appeared on The Sartorialist in August 2009, and was captioned "Not giving up, NYC".
This image of a homeless man has become one of Schuman's most controversial. If most fashion media rests on schooling consumers on good fashion choices (regarding 'on trend' styles), this blog post focuses on a man whose range of choices is so obviously limited. Schuman rarely explains why his subjects inspire him in much detail; their good taste is usually implicit. However this note from Schuman accompanied this image:

"Usually people in this man's position have given up hope. Maybe this gentleman has too, I don't know, but he hasn't given up his sense of self or his sense of expressing something about himself to the world. In my quick shot I had noticed his pale blue boots, what I hadn't noticed at first were the matching blue socks, blue trimmed gloves, and blue framed glasses. This shot isn't about fashion - but about someone who, while down on his luck, hasn't lost his need to communicate and express himself through style. Looking at him dressed like this makes me feel that in some way he hasn't given in or given up (2009)."

It is not that Schuman linked street style to somebody that lives on the street that is important here, since even that is not without precedent. For his Spring-Summer 2000 collection for Christian Dior Couture, John Galliano presented dresses inspired by the homeless people he had 'admired' whilst jogging around Paris. It was dubbed 'boho-chic' by mainstream press, and was mercilessly lampooned - given that, in general, those homeless would struggle to entertain notions of fashion, whilst couture in particular is accessible only to a few hundred clients worldwide. That said, though, whatever stylistic symmetry exists between Galliano's rendering of 'boho-chic' and this image from The Sartorialist should not obscure a fundamental difference, an irony that actually inverts whatever inferiority this man's homelessness implies. Galliano's designs might be worth tens of thousands of dollars (as per couture pricing), but the job of traditional fashion media is to translate their accessibility: firstly, to the tiny coterie of couture clients; then through Dior's prêt-a-porter (ready-to-wear line); through to its accessories and cosmetics; and finally to the mass-produced copies in suburban malls around the world. The message trickles down, and a system is sustained. The quality that Schuman has focused on, though, is actually far more elusive - and therefore by the cruel logic of 'true' glamour, far more attractive: somewhere between self-possession and indifference (Wilson 2007: 105). As such, this is the exact opposite of that 'other' fashion victim - both created and despised by most fashion media, the slavish follower of every fashion edict, whether couture or cut-price (Schiermer 2010: 89). This is not a look inspired by homelessness; it is homelessness; and whatever it was that impressed Schuman (a combination of defiance and pride, judging by his explanation) cannot be bought. This pinpoints the ideological imperative of traditional fashion media: to oil the wheels of commerce, to satisfy advertisers, and to lock consumers into a perennial cycle of desire and then dissatisfaction. Bloggers, though, are free to canvass representations of style, beauty, fashion and elegance that are outside the parameters of industry, and as such would not be seen in the pages of Vogue, Elle or Harper's Bazaar.

The second image from The Sartorialist to be considered was taken in Australia, in December 2009. Schuman now takes photographs around the world. He will often flag upcoming trips on the blog, and this always prompts pleas for him to visit particular streets or precincts. Before this trip to Australia, for instance, readers in Sydney and Melbourne begged Schuman to visit their areas: Paddington, Little Collins Street, and so on. Predictably, Schuman heeded these requests, and snaps from Bondi, Surry Hills and South Yarra were posted. This image though, taken on Chapel Street in Melbourne, was far from predictable.
Not only did it lack the conventional hallmarks of 'Australiana' fashion - bush-wear, swimwear or Indigenous motifs (Craik 2009: 411); it flagrantly spotlights one of the country's most volatile debates - the growing visibility of Islamic dress.
Moreover, it triggered what remains the largest response from the blog's readers. The appeal of a particular image can usually be gauged from the amount of comments it draws from Schuman's fans. An average number is about 150; a high number is about 300. This image drew almost 800. It subverts one of the most dominant assumptions in conventional fashion wisdom: a tacit association between fashion, sex and seduction. Since September 2001, few articles in Western, English-speaking societies have been as widely debated as the hijab. It suggests some proximity to a religion that is not only controversial but also often aligned with the active subordination of its female followers. As it appears here though, the hijab becomes something else - through her choice of colours, accessories and demeanour, this woman's ensemble suggests sartorial ownership. The overwhelming majority of readers' comments focused not on a widely perceived incongruity between religious dress and fashion (Akou 2007: 403); but on her creative play with colour, cut and proportion - in other words, on her personal style. This is another representation that is, for now, unlikely to be seen in traditional fashion media since it shows commitment to something bigger than fashion, and therefore will not bend to seasonal swings or industry imperatives.

These two images underline the freedom of bloggers: their view has not been filtered through the thick web of public relations, styling, and advertising and thus makes room for the myriad of ways ordinary people express themselves through dress. It is a romantic view, because it suggests critical distance from the fashion system. However, while such blogs began on the fringes of fashion media, they now occupy an increasingly lucrative position. In turn, it is argued here that, for all their potential to add to fashion media in atypical and avant-garde ways, as evidenced by these two images, these bloggers' rise has not gone unnoticed by fashion's stalwarts. Therein lies the tricky intermingling of new-media ideals and corporate agendas, and the reason why these Web 2.0 stars have not so much as redefined fashion media as multiplied the ways fashion media reaches consumers. Besides the Sartorialist blog, for instance, and in the wake of its growing influence, Schuman has been commissioned by *GQ* magazine, DKNY clothing, Saba clothing, and style.com (the online home of US *Vogue*); he has appeared in ads for Gap, has a book deal with Penguin, and is regularly name-checked by top designers as a source of inspiration. Tavi was one of several bloggers invited as front-row guests for the 2009 and 2010 collections in Paris, London, Milan and New York; Marc Jacobs was so impressed by Manila-based blogger Bryan Boy, he named an ostrich bag after him; and *Elle* magazine and Westfield have both commissioned Garance Doré's illustrations. In short, such relationships hollow whatever claim these bloggers once had to an 'outsider' perspective: now co-opted by those that have long dominated fashion media, it is arguable that that the bloggers' freedom is, if not diminished, then certainly compromised. At the very least, it is likely that the more that bloggers liaise with the fashion establishment, the harder it will be to insist on their editorial independence.

It is not just these outside affiliations that have changed the Sartorialist blog. As much as Schuman applauds the offbeat style of eccentrics and outsiders, his critics have noted a growing tendency on his blog. As Schuman walks the streets of Milan, London and Paris now, there is increasing coverage of fashion insiders: socialites, fashion assistants and in particular the 'Voguettes' - the beautiful editors and stylists of *Vogue* magazines from around the world. Schuman has acknowledged this to a degree, and argued that, given that he is partial to beauty and elegance, it follows that those who trade in beauty and elegance will catch his eye. Yet this dynamic has not been without some intervention and manipulation from fashion's elite. Take for instance Chanel's 'brand ambassadors'. This group of women (handpicked by house designer Karl Lagerfeld) is lavished with new-season Chanel pieces and encouraged to work them into their own stylish wardrobes. They are not models as such, because they do not appear in the official campaigns or advertisements: they are beautiful women whose sole purpose as Chanel's ambassadors is to be seen (and documented) being beautiful. Not surprisingly, then, as they walk the streets of London and Paris doing just that, they are snapped by Schuman and appear on The Sartorialist. This group includes Leigh Lezark, Caroline Seiber and Keira Knightley. With their repeat appearances on The Sartorialist, it seems less likely that Schuman is responding intuitively to their 'innate' sense of style, and more likely that Chanel has successfully planted their ambassadors in the fashion zones Schuman inhabits.

**Fashion Film Online**

Another new media phenomenon that has affected how fashion is both defined and displayed is the shift away from still photography towards the moving image, in the form of online video. London Fashion Week, for instance, recently included a 'digital schedule' of fashion films to coincide with the regular runway shows. Besides opportunities to view 'real life' events online, though, more pertinent to this discussion is just how much new fashion media relies on the 'clip culture' of online communities. Fashion clips are now produced for (and distributed through) new digital channels (like *Test* and *Nowness*), dedicated brand websites (such as Burberry's), and online fashion magazines (for example, *Tangent Magazine*, based in Sydney).
Widespread interest in this phenomenon is reflected in the range of cultural institutions that have chosen to either exhibit or analyse fashion film in the last few years - certainly more than the amount of academic interest fashion blogs has generated. In 2008, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne held the 'unofficial' Marc Jacobs Film Festival; and in 2009, Somerset House staged a retrospective called 'Fashion Revolution' - a revolution in the way fashion is communicated', covering nine years of SHOWStudio, from pioneer photographer and filmmaker Nick Knight. In 2010, a strong theme of Sydney Design at the Powerhouse Museum was fashion film; whilst at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, high-profile fashion blogger Diane Pernet hosted the 3rd Fashion Film Festival. Besides these more cerebral treatments, there has also been a spate of fashion features in movie theatres: from satire (Brüno, 2009), 'chick flicks' (The Devil Wears Prada, 2006, and the Sex and the City franchise, 2008 and 2010), documentary (Valentino, The Last Emperor, 2008, and The September Issue, 2009), as well as designer Tom Ford's directorial debut, A Single Man (2009). While these releases do not necessarily reflect innovation in moving image explorations, which is most relevant to this article, they do suggest that, even for non-afficionados, film is an increasingly popular and accessible way to screen and see fashion.

Just as the most popular fashion bloggers have moved closer to the sites of traditional power, so too do fashion films increasingly blur the thin line between art and industry, creativity and control. In Pernet's program for the film festival in Paris, these twin poles are clearly demarcated, and perhaps dichotomised, as 'Communication' (fashion film as advertising and branding) and 'Reflection' (fashion film as a cultural activity). In turn, few genres trick this divide as much as the 'fragrance film'. In the last few years, Chanel, Prada and Dior have enlisted the auteurs of modern cinema to create films that don't just sell scent, but tell a story - branding as narrative, not merely allusion. In their big-budget collaborations with the stars of modern cinema - stars behind and in front of the camera - these films suggest that, as the mediasphere becomes more fragmented, and consumer interest more precious, such projects are needed for brands to 'cut through', hold audience interest, and maintain cultural cache.
Figure 6: Chanel 'Bleu De Chanel' the film (2010), Dir. Martin Scorsese

One of the most ambitious examples of this strategy was 'No. 5 The Film' (2004), 'by' Baz Luhrmann, for Chanel. With a reported budget of $(US) 42 million, two versions were produced: an extended 'film' at 3 minutes, and a conventional 30-second television commercial. Similarly, in 2010, Martin Scorsese put his name to 'Bleu De Chanel the Film', Chanel's latest foray into both men's fragrance and fragrance film. Both films work through an inherent affinity between icons of screen, and an icon of fashion, and the imagery revels in the signature motifs of Chanel, as well that of Luhrmann and Scorsese. Such films ('films by') essentially function as forms of 'branded content', whereby advertisers (in this case, Chanel) do not simply rent media space but own it. For Christina Spurgeon, writing on new trends in advertising and new media, this growing trend sees a "blurring of the distinction between commerce and art, and popular culture and public culture" (Spurgeon 2008: 40). In turn, she borrows the phrase 'Madison and Vine', coined by Scott Donaton (2004) to describe the convergence of advertising (Madison Avenue, New York) and entertainment (Vine Street, Los Angeles). It is argued here that Chanel's arrangements with Luhrmann and Scorsese arrive at 'Madison and Vine', as a veneer of entertainment superimposed upon a big budget advertising campaign. References to each director's oeuvre are explicit; for Luhrmann, a set that reconstructs a Parisian rooftop, and for Scorsese, the New York City setting - props to carry the advertising message with 'value-added' cultural resonance (that is, consumers' cinema literacy). With other auteurs working on similar high-end fashion films, this is a burgeoning genre: Ridley Scott (for Prada), David Lynch (for Dior), Jean-Pierre Jeunet (also for Chanel) and most recently - Frank Miller (of *Sin City* fame) for Gucci. Without exception, the films necessitate the inclusion of the 'money-shot', when the branded product becomes the necessary and final focal point; where commerce overcomes artfulness.

Figure 7: Gucci 'Guilty' (2010), Dir. Frank Miller

While these 'auteurs-for-hire' occupy a rather conservative (or at least predictable) spot in the art-industry spectrum; it is also argued here that a younger generation of designers is exploring more avant-garde options with fashion film. For instance, there is a growing tendency amongst many designers to bypass the traditional runway as a primary exhibition space, and replace it with online video. A key player here is UK fashion photographer, and now filmmaker, Nick Knight. Knight conceived SHOWStudio.com more than a decade ago, a prescient example of how broadband-driven Web-2.0 could change the relationship between the makers and consumers of fashion (or at least how this relationship is mediated). For Knight, the moving image offers not just a more compelling narrative opportunity, but more accurately captures the flow of fashion itself - the folds, pleats and sartorial architecture of the clothing. As Knight explains: "I have always believed that when a designer creates a garment, their vision of it is in motion. Any still image of that is just a compromise of the designer's vision" (in Lock 2010: 122). Here, the convergence of media technology and fashion is in the service of fashion; one result might well be a more seductive sell, but Knight's motivation is also to explore this transformation in fashion
media, from the still to moving image, with regard to aesthetic criteria.

Figure 8: Nick Knight/SHOWStudio: fashion film for Jung Kuho

This trend in fashion media, from still to moving image, rests on the multiplication and co-evolution of media forms (Fidler 1997: 23). For this reason, it is different to the shift seen in the 1930s, when illustration was largely superseded by the emerging technology of photography. In a digital media landscape the result is media convergence, not obsolescence, and the space between the still and moving image is reframed, not disavowed. This is seen in the fashion films of Steven Klein. Klein offers 'Director's Cuts' (as online video) derived from his still photography for print media (Lock 2010). In the films, Klein's still-photography style, which is marked by a dark and gritty realism, morphs into moving imagery.
Burberry has also gotten behind this blending of still photography and moving imagery. Specifically, Burberry's online experiments, at the behest of house designer Christopher Bailey, see fashion models manipulated in a simulated, 3D environment, enabling users panoramic perception of the garment in question. Bailey has inserted his own presence at the forefront of the digital media campaigns, addressing an online audience directly via video clips on YouTube and Facebook. On the '3D interactive' images he says, "we did the [runway] show in 3D, the women's show, and we also wanted to capture that 3D effect with the images, we wanted the energy of them jumping out of the page" (2010).

Of particular interest to this discussion then is how online video opens up new spaces for fashion expression, in ways that don't just extend the marketing field, but relay a designer's vision in more lateral ways. With his anti-establishment style and sensibility, UK designer Gareth Pugh, for example, follows the fashion footsteps of Vivienne Westwood, John Galliano and the late Alexander McQueen. For Pugh, fashion is essentially "about a mood, or an essence, or a feeling that is morphed into a collection" (in Lock 2010). Pugh's interest in mood, tone and texture plays into his collaborations with filmmaker Ruth Hogben, at Knight's SHOWStudio website. So, whereas Chanel and Dior replicate the language of auteur cinema, designers like Pugh appropriate an aesthetic derived from avant-garde film practices that elevate abstraction over narrative; and fuse colour, form and movement with stop-motion, slow motion and animation techniques. Avant-garde fashion media also follows the path of this tradition of moving image production and distribution whereby:

[t]he film-makers who make up the avant-garde are producing films which are fundamentally different to their mainstream
In contrast with the high-end fashion films of Chanel or Dior (which, in Chanel's case, foreground Nicole Kidman and Audrey Tatou in Lagerfeld's couture), Pugh's films work through the nuances and mood of each collection—not a sales-ready reflection of the catalogue or catwalk. For the Spring/Summer 2010 collection, Pugh and Hogben created a four-part conceptual film titled 'Earth, Water, Wind and Fire' that was simultaneously projected live onto a giant cube installation at MILK studios in New York and streamed to a global audience online. This example highlights a convergence between new avant-garde inspired fashion films, of this calibre, and conceptual film and video installations prevalent in contemporary art today. Saying this, an important point to make here, is that today the line of demarcation between commercial fashion film (the auteurs) and 'art-fashion film' (the avant-gardes) does not divide on lines of distribution like in the past, where the latter would be screened through film co-operatives and societies. In the new media landscape, the expensive, commercial fashion film productions (increasingly embedded in online media) share virtual space with these more ambitious, artful experiments in fashion film.

Miuccia Prada, at the helm of iconic Italian house Prada, has been similarly inspired by new media opportunities. For the Men's Spring/Summer 2010 campaign, Prada commissioned a 9-minute film by Chinese video artist Yang Fudong, to be distributed online. This black-and-white, enigmatic film takes dominant place in relation to a minimalist print campaign that simply reproduces a set of stills from the film. Similar to Pugh's fashion film strategy, in this campaign Prada effectively marginalises the product, and instead foregrounds an affiliation with art ('for art's sake') in order to convey "a set of values - hope, change, artsy cool - to push emotional and intellectual buttons" (Friedman 2010). Having already collaborated with leading architects Rem Koolhaas and Herzog de Meuron to design their flagship stores, Prada is clearly looking beyond the traditional parameters of fashion media to communicate the brand, and its this breadth of vision that can harness new media opportunities in creative, innovative ways.
As influential as fashion blogs and fashion film have become, it is more than likely that social media like Facebook will most affect how fashion is mediated in the twenty-first century, and this too has been acknowledged and engaged by the industry. This can be seen, for instance, in the way fashion films have been positioned within a new media structure. The Chanel film by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, with Audrey Tatou advertising the iconic No. 5 fragrance, is enmeshed within a dedicated website, replete with an interactive menu and extra production material, that bundles behind-the-scenes photos and interviews with the creative collaborators. In this sense, fashion brands adopting convergent fashion media strategies seek to engage with 'branded content' in order to "creatively embed their messages in media flows and experiences that coveted consumers will actively seek out" and share across social media portals (Spurgeon 2008: 27). Here, social media technologies are coopted to transition ordinary consumers into brand 'owners and advocates', who 'voluntarily' embed fashion media within their personalised media flows of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

It is in this realm of social media that the line between control and creative strategies in new fashion media is most blurred. The recent admission from Christopher Bailey that Burberry has become "as much a media-content company as [a] design company because it's all part of the overall experience" (in Leitch 2010) suggests that, as consumers assume more power in content creation, the onus is on the big brands to work with this dynamic. Under Bailey, Burberry has pursued an aggressive new media strategy that has successfully reinvented the heritage brand for the twenty-first century. According to the editor of the Business of Fashion website, Burberry represents "the world's first truly digital luxury brand" that has capitalised on trends in convergent media. For its Autumn/Winter 2010 collection, during London Fashion Week, for instance, Burberry distributed a global online simulcast. Editor for Business of Fashion, Imrad Amed writes:

It was billed as the world's first truly global fashion show, taking place on the penultimate day of London Fashion Week, beamed live in 3D to five global cities, and streamed to the rest of the world via 73 websites, including Vogue, Grazia and CNN, which all picked up the video feed in a global simulcast. It was undoubtedly the most widely distributed fashion show a luxury brand has ever staged, potentially reaching an audience of more than 100 million users, according to Burberry CEO Angela Ahrendts (2010).

This strategy effectively transcends the traditional fashion press to connect directly with the fashion audience. In addition, this content is rapidly interwoven within consumers' personal media trajectories. To consider another example: theartofthetrench.com, a website that, although set up by Burberry, does not follow obvious advertising logic. Strictly speaking, this is a non-commercial site (it does not process sales) but it shows how bloggers have inspired the likes of
Bailey. This site features 'candid' pictures of everyday people, on streets around the world, wearing a Burberry trench. None other than Scott Schuman - the Sartorialist - shot the first series of photographs (see below).

Figure 15: The Art of the Trench

Yet there is a double tension here, since Schuman's fans have come to associate his photography with whim and chance: they want to believe that street style can hold its own, and that he just happens to be at the right place at the right time to bear witness to this. Burberry plays on this perception, as does Schuman, and this has paid off. The latest experiment is the 'Burberry Acoustic' sessions that create live music videos of popular UK bands (attired in Burberry of course) to distribute as clips online.
Figure 16: Burberry Acoustic

The videos are filmed in a single take and reference the work of French filmmaker Vincent Moon and his Takeaway Shows that have proved immensely popular at the video podcast site 'La Blogotheque'. This reflects the trend towards 'branded entertainment' online that "aims to contextualize brand images in ways that are so appealing that consumers will seek them out for inclusion in their personalized media and entertainment flows (Spurgeon 2008: 40). Such intersections with new media have given Burberry's Facebook group over 1.2 million fans, now the prime media portal for the brand, regularly updated with these latest campaigns. However creative the 'Burberry 2.0' incarnations are, they also reveal a disciplined and targeted assault on social media networks. Given the presence of Schuman, in the Art of the Trench, and the hijacking of Vincent Moon's online music video style, for Burberry Acoustic, it is doubtful that Burberry's social media presence is as 'bottoms-up' as the brand would have consumers believe. In the new media environment, the separation of creativity and control, what is organic and what is not, is an area that fashion brands need to tread carefully. Burberry seeks to replicate the spontaneity of a 'street style' approach; but so much contrivance (albeit via Schuman et al) lacks the immediacy and indeed efficacy of earlier street style blogs.

Conclusion

In the blogs, films and social media canvassed in this article, it is clear that, in the twenty-first century, fashion media is far more fragmented and multiplatform than it was just decades ago. This is hardly surprising: convergent media has dramatically altered the production, distribution and consumption of digital content, and an industry that revels in imagery and spectacle is primed to exploit these new opportunities. What is significant here though is the extent to which these opportunities challenge or consolidate the distribution of power in traditional fashion media. Glossy magazines like Vogue once drew their privilege from their access to the catwalks of Paris: in the last few years though, new media technologies have seen fashion mediated in ways that accommodate other, more alternative, perspectives to expand the democratisation of fashion within popular culture. Herein lies the potential of new fashion media to recast the parameters of fashion discourse, and open it up to voices and visions that have been hitherto excluded from mainstream channels. As illustrated through two images from The Sartorialist, or through designers like Gareth Pugh, there is scope for new media fashion to accommodate more innovative and even egalitarian contributions, in ways that bypass the traditional sites of control and influence. That said, and as seen through the fragrance films of Chanel, or Burberry's social media initiatives, the megabrands of fashion have been equally adept at exploiting the speed, reach and salience of these same technologies. As such, this articles shows that fashion media today reflects the multiplication effect of digital convergence, whereby the capacity to 'speak up' and 'stand out' has certainly been extended - but not in a way that necessarily dislodges the political-economy of the industry itself. There are moments of subversion, independence and creative experimentation, but these are invariably dwarfed by asymmetries of control that owe more to Old World power than new media technologies.
References


Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney