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Following Fashion: Sharing the Private in Public

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This article presents an exploration of the division, or lack of division, between the private and the public in relation to online fashion personalities. In the contemporary fashion world, where technology prevails, any girl-next-door can become a recognised fashion 'personality', seemingly qualified to present her private thoughts to a public apparently hungry to hear them. In discussing this assumption, this article examines how conceptions of private and public fit within the realm of the fashion spectacle, with particular reference to Instagram, and how the process of fashioning a self-brand is enacted within this sharing, attention economy.

In his influential novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*, first published in 1949, George Orwell wrote: "With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end" (214). Orwell's prophetic note has become increasingly accurate with the ubiquity of personal technology and media devices, which allow us to receive and transmit private details on public platforms. One of the most visually pervasive areas in which this process occurs is in the fashion sphere. In the contemporary fashion world, where technology prevails, any girl-next-door can become a recognised "personality," seemingly qualified to present her private thoughts to a public apparently hungry to hear them.

The fashion industry has always held a curious position between the worlds of the public and the private, yet this delicate balance seems to have become increasingly precipitous in recent years. Here, I discuss this balance with particular reference to contemporary online fashion personalities. I use the term "online fashion personality," because the term "blogger" seems too narrow a definition. While the blog platform may once have offered the blogger a unique forum through which to present details of their private life, this has changed in the last five years, a shift largely due to Instagram (an online photo and video sharing service). In the Instagram-age the blog seems to have become the source of editorial content, while the Instagram account has become the portal through which the online fashion personality offers a vision of their "private" life. The online fashion personality often makes use of both the blog and the Instagram platform, though for very different purposes. With this distinction in mind, I introduce a case study, followed by an exploration of the position of fashion within both the private and public spheres, in particular the process of fashioning a self-brand. Finally, I consider how the concepts of public and private fit into our contemporary, technology-fuelled existence, looking especially at the complexity of the contemporary fashion spectacle.

A Fashion Personality

My thinking on this subject first began when I was reading the paper on a sunny weekend morning. *The Melbourne Age* publishes a weekly supplement in its Saturday edition called *Good*

Weekend. One of the features in this publication is a column entitled 'Two of Us," focusing on the relationship between two people. In a recent (August 2015) issue the two people in question were 1970s Australian rugby star Russell Fairfax and his daughter Nadia, a high-profile fashion blogger. While the article was essentially a simple tribute to the love of father and daughter, what struck me most were Nadia's comments concerning her career. Trying to explain to her father, an ex-athlete in his mid-sixties, what she actually *does*, Nadia noted: "we were at a NSW Waratahs [rugby union] game and I pointed to the 40,000 strong crowd and told Dad my Instagram following would fill two stadiums with people who were *interested in my life*. He still didn't get it" (Grossetti 8, emphasis added). To me, this anecdote reveals the ways in which the fashion industry has changed in terms of the distinction between the private and the public. Fairfax has recognised the crux of this development: people are interested in following her *life*, not just her fashion.

Nadia Fairfax is a leading Australian fashion personality, based in both Sydney and New York. At the time of writing, Fairfax boasts over one hundred thousand Instagram followers, far exceeding the capacity of two rugby stadiums. In addition, she was recently cast in the 2015 season of Australian reality television series *Fashion Bloggers*, a move that has seen her transition out of the realm of the purely online "microcelebrity" and into the mainstream media. While Fairfax's blog, Twitter account and Facebook page, as well as the television series, all have thousands of followers and subscribers, it is her Instagram account that really dominates. The *Fairfax Journal* blog is Fairfax's carefully curated editorial landing point. However, this is only updated monthly, while it is the often daily updates of her Instagram feed that quite literally *feeds* the attention of her many followers. The Instagram feed offers her audience very different content from that published on her blog. While it is still a curated image of a fashionable life, it provides far more in the way of actual *living* than that of the glossy blog images. For example, on 23 August 2015, Fairfax posted a photograph of herself, swimsuit-clad, on a boat off the shore of Australia's Hamilton Island. While the image features reference to her fashion choices, including Dior sunglasses, Sarah Curtis hat, and Mikoh bathers, it is unlikely to feature on the blog. It is a snapshot; a "candid" holiday image and, as such, it does not fit the formal editorial style of the blog. There is a similar shot from four weeks earlier, featuring another boat, another perfectly blue ocean, another Mikoh swimsuit, this time in the Bahamas. While it is the blog that portrays the definitively *public* Nadia Fairfax, it is, arguably, the *private* life of Nadia Fairfax, as portrayed via Instagram, that garners her such attention. It is not simply that Fairfax produces beautiful fashion plates, perfectly styled and impeccably shot; rather, it is that she also shares the rest of her life with her followers. Of course, the lifestyle-based Instagram images are no less beautiful, perfectly styled nor impeccably shot; they simply portray a different aspect of the curated persona. These are the images that make Fairfax approachable and relatable. It is through such images that Fairfax has achieved what Alice E. Marwick calls "Instafame" (137), and what Theresa Senft calls "microcelebrity" (346). Both "Instafame" and "microcelebrity" rely on the strategic formulation of an online profile in order to attract followers. And, as Marwick notes, this profile depends upon the author revealing "personal information to increase attention and thus improve their online status" (138). This is particularly the case with online fashion personalities, who rely on details of their personal life to gather both interest and followers. In fact, it seems that the

portrayal of a particular personal perspective, or details of one's private life, are crucial elements in the construction of a successful online fashion personality – a branded "self."

Fashioning a Brand

In the manner of Anthony Giddens before her, Alison Hearn writes that the construction of a self-brand "involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industry" (198). Helen Woodruffe-Burton suggests that, in the past, the construction of self was primarily facilitated through the conspicuous consumption of fashion products. As she notes, "the self is conceptualised in postmodernity not as a given product of a social system nor as a fixed entity which the individual can simply adopt, but as something the person actively creates, partially through consumption" (302). Fashion has always been an aspect of the public sphere, positioned as a field through which we present our private "self" to the public. However, what is interesting about this dynamic in the Instagram-driven media culture of today is that fashion is no longer used simply in the fashioning of self; it is also crucial in the fashioning of the personal brand.

This movement away from the relatively straightforward (though of course never simple) construction of a personal, private self, to the far more complex construction of a public self-brand has not been instantaneous. Nor, in fact, is it a particularly recent development. In his 1991 book, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Mike Featherstone pointed to the ways in which postmodern consumers make a project of their lifestyles, and remarked upon the use of both consumer products, including fashion, and individual experiences to construct a particular personal lifestyle. Moreover, the private details of celebrity lives have long been of interest to dedicated fans: social media simply allows celebrities to capitalise on this fascination, by sharing private details on public forums. As Marwick notes, "'[t]raditional' celebrities like pop stars and actors have embraced social media to create direct, unmediated relationships with fans, or at least the illusion of such" (139). The power of social media platforms such as Instagram for the development of the self-brand is made explicit in John Colapinto's recent article in *The New Yorker* on Olivier Rousteings, creative director at the fashion label Balmain. Rousteings launched his personal Instagram account in 2012, in order to, as Colapinto puts it, "reach out directly to the 'Balmaniacs' who follow him." Despite the fact that Rousteings's Instagram headline reads "THIS IS MY REALITY," his digital life is of course "a concoction" (Colapinto 1). Rousteings uses his famous friends, most notably Justin Bieber and the Kardashian/Jenner sisters, as his "brand ambassadors" and they feature heavily on his Instagram feed. Rousteings clearly engages with social media not only to promote Balmain as a commercial enterprise, but also to foster his own self-brand. And, as Marwick remarks, the "impression of candid, unfettered access" is of utmost importance in this process (139).

The illusion of a direct and unmediated relationship with fans and/or consumers has become a ubiquitous feature of social media platforms such as Instagram. Not only has this development given way to new marketing tools for established brands and traditional celebrities, it has also provided the foundation for a whole new genre of digital celebrities, the microcelebrity. As Marwick suggests, microcelebrity is especially linked to the "increasingly pervasive notion of 'self-branding,' a self-

presentation strategy that requires viewing oneself as a consumer product and selling this image to others" (140). This process of self-branding, beyond the purview of a conventional business brand, is perhaps most clearly expressed in the individual branding of online fashion personalities such as Fairfax. Instagram provides the means by which Fairfax can break down the barriers between her private and public persona. The ability to create her own "self-brand" depends heavily upon her willingness, perhaps even her enthusiasm, to present her private life in the public sphere – or at least a carefully curated version of it.

Of course, the simple fact that we all wear clothes in public means that we are all implicated in the process of sharing our fashioned private selves in the public sphere on an everyday basis. Arthur Asa Berger suggests that "from a semiotic perspective, brands are signifiers that we use to help define ourselves to others and, to a certain degree, without being too reductionistic, we can say that we *are* the brands we assemble to forge a public identity" (235). However, when this process becomes part of what Marwick, in line with marketing theory, calls "the attention economy" (138), these elements of everyday life are progressively monetised. The self-brand becomes increasingly significant and the fashion spectacle increasingly complex.[1]

Living in the Public

The ubiquity of personal transmitting devices, and mobile social media applications such as Instagram, have enabled a pervasive publicising of private lives. Indeed, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write, "[t]hose of us in Western industrialised cultures live in a multimedia environment in which mechanical and electronic images, text, and sound are an almost constant presence. The media are pervasive in most of our lives, yet we tend to take them for granted" (151). Marwick also observes that "the 'always-on' nature of social media encourages celebrities and those aspiring to be famous to share constant details of their day-to-day lives" in an attempt to foster an audience of the highest numbers (140). While Sturken and Cartwright suggest that, "in the media landscape of the late twentieth century, the boundaries between news and fiction and between entertainment and information were increasingly blurred," it seems that in the media landscape of the twenty-first century, it has become almost impossible to make these distinctions (158). Rather than the uni-directional media platforms that Sturken and Cartwright discuss, the multi-dimensional media platforms of the contemporary era allow for the facilitation of a shared conversation between publisher and audience, a shared conversation that gives rise to a sense of ownership that has its own multifarious outcomes. Despite the impression of egalitarianism, Marwick for one recognises the essentially conservative aspects of the technology:

> While Instagram makes it possible for 'regular people' to attract mass audiences historically
> limited to broadcast media, the Instafamous tend to be conventionally good-looking, work in
> 'cool' industries such as modelling … and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional
> celebrity culture, such as glamorous self-portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars. (139)

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[1] I conceive of the fashion spectacle in terms of the way in which Guy Debord conceives of the spectacle of modern industrial society. Namely, the world in which we live, in "the present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy," entails a generalised shift from having to appearing (17). All effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d'être* from appearances.

As such, while trends toward 'Instafame' and 'microcelebrity' may appear democratic, "those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies … that depend on the ability to emulate the visual iconography of mainstream celebrity culture" (Marwick 139). The concept of fashion democratisation seems to be a prevailing myth. Rousteings's strategy for Balmain is apparently "globalisation" and "democratisation," however, as Colapinto remarks, "he doesn't seem to worry about how those young democratic types would locate the funds for a seventeen-thousand-dollar dress" (Colapinto 1). While Rousteings may speak of democracy, what he is actually dealing in is aspiration. Similarly, Fairfax, while appearing to be approachable and relatable, presents aspirational snapshots of a carefully curated private life to her public followers, making apparent reality into a dream.

The fashion industry has always been a spectacular one, compelled to produce ever more dramatic showcases of goods, portraying an ever more extravagant vision of the fashionable life. As Karen de Perthuis states: "artifice lies at the very core of fashion's existence" (168). The complex relationship between fashion and capitalist spectacle is considered in detail by Caroline Evans who suggests that this relationship is fundamental to the social spectacle of women throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a relationship which has made the body and dress indistinguishable, and rendered fashion an indelible feature of spectacular contemporary society. The advent of the microcelebrity marks a new development: the once private body is now on perpetual public display, employed not only as a vehicle for the exhibition of fashion but also as a vehicle for the systematic acquisition of an audience. The calculated monetisation of this shift shares some parallels with what Ori Schwarz calls "productivization," a process characterised by "the exploitation of the present" (84). Schwarz looks specifically at the "productivization of social interactions," the sharing of conversations, films and photographs of one's private life which transforms social exchanges into durable objects (80). For Schwarz this phenomenon is central to the evolution of late-modern subjectivity, and certainly the contemporary subject is often adept in negotiating this process. Nadia Fairfax, for example, can productivize the details of her everyday private life for social status, influence and attention as well as monetary gain.

In the contemporary "attention economy," then, it is not only "traditional" celebrities, such as Bieber and the Kardashian/Jenner sisters, who act as "brand advocates," but also online fashion personalities such as Fairfax. The microcelebrity, as brand advocate, is gifted garments and accessories by brands, which they then incorporate into their everyday outfits and personal style. Australian Instagram personality Essena O'Neill recently revealed how she was paid to promote clothes and other products, before deleting her account upon realising that "the pictures 'served no real purpose other than self-promotion'" (Elgot 1). While O'Neill was ostensibly paid to promote a product, she recognised that the process promoted her banded "self" just as much, if not more, than it promoted the branded commodity: her online "self" was maintained "as if it were a branded good" (Senft 346). O'Neill revealed that she could earn up AU$2,000 for a sponsored post, yet she made it look as though the products she was promoting were her own. This demonstrates how the brand advocate "acts as a powerful yet inconspicuous advertisement for … brands," persuading consumers "that these brands are within reach of their own everyday fashion experience" (Richards 12). Part of O'Neill's popularity, as with that of Nadia Fairfax, lies in her "girl-next-door" appeal, a deeply

disingenuous form of branding in its seeming artlessness. The deep entanglement of branded product and branded self, and the widespread disavowal of the mechanics of this monetised system is perhaps the most insidious feature of this 'attention economy.'

The media spectacle constructs an imagined ground for individual expression, which is in fact driven by the complex demands of a powerful consumer capitalist culture. The spectacular nature of the fashion industry demands novelty, which Instagram is perfectly placed to deliver. The construction of this spectacle is strongly implicated in the demand to share the private in the public in the media-saturated contemporary capitalist era. Indeed, perhaps it is this spectacular digital culture that Orwell prophesised when he suggested that public life would one day come to an end.

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