



# Fashion Communication: A Thread Connecting Students to the World

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**Abstract.** Globally, Fashion Communication (FCO) remains a relatively new discipline in higher education, acknowledging a need to train more in effectively communicating messages for fashion businesses and consumers. At a Mid-western school, the discipline is the focus of an undergraduate degree program that takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining courses in fashion, media, business, and graphic design. Within the major's course curriculum, opportunities exist to infuse concepts about international affairs to heighten awareness and engage communicators in responsibly interpreting and disseminating information such to audiences. Through the lens of significant-learning pedagogy and the contextual model of intercultural communication, this case study describes an assignment in a Fashion Journalism course, where students self-reflect on their own identity and practice intercultural communication skills to interview wearers of the hijab for a story. The analysis will include observations and semi-structured interviews with the students, a textual analysis of their stories, and a reflection of my experience teaching the course.

**Keywords:** Media education · Intercultural communication · Fashion communication

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Globally, Fashion Communication remains a relatively new major in higher education institutions, acknowledging a need to train more in effectively communicating messages for fashion industry businesses and consumers [1]. A program exists at a Mid-western college, where a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Fashion Communication (FCO) is an undergraduate interdisciplinary degree, which combines the disciplines of fashion, media, business and graphic design. Knowledge gained from these areas can be used to help lifestyle brands to build and relay their messages across multiple communication channels such as print, broadcast, and internet. The FCO major contains numerous courses that allow an instructor to infuse concepts that heighten awareness about international affairs and engage communicators in responsibly interpreting and disseminating information regarding such to audiences.

The curriculum enables me to align with one of fashion program's student learning outcomes, global learning, which demonstrates "an understanding of complex, interdependent global systems and their implications for people's lives and the earth's sustainability, completing projects that consider the world's pressing issues and associated ethical decisions" [1]. Several course-related assignments aim to uphold this student-centered approach. There is Fashion Journalism, where students learn to report and interview women who practice Islam and wear the hijab; Current Issues in the Global Fashion Industry, where students work on a simulated consulting project that requires them to advise a major brand about business expansion into a chosen country; and Fashion Communication Capstone Research and Project, where students work on a senior capstone that captures skills and knowledge gained into a professional-level project, evaluated by industry critics. Several students look to themes currently in the global sphere and synthesize findings into their independent and group assignments.

To achieve this structure, the major's course content primarily uses a backward instructional design method [2]. Fink (2013) states that "creating assessment activities first greatly clarifies and facilitates answers to questions of what learning activities need to be" [2, p. 71]. Scaffolding throughout the course enables me to build the student's confidence and competency in these cultural explorations.

This remains important since students in the Fashion Communication major are part of a complex system in the textile and apparel and media business, where collaboration and innovation exist on a global scale. In the fashion and media world, educating students to be change makers and influencers across borders requires additional training and little has been done to explore the process. Therefore, the purpose of this case study is to describe intercultural communication exchanges and the pedagogical features of a Fashion Journalism writing assignment, where students interview wearers of the hijab. This study aims to discuss the contextual model of intercultural communication in the context of student interactions; to examine the pedagogical features of an assignment designed to create a significant learning experience; and to reflect on my role and experiences in teaching this assignment.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Pedagogical and Communication Frameworks**

Because of increased global tensions, there is a need for more "effective and competent intercultural communication" [3, p. 4]. Neuliep (2012) argues that the need goes beyond existing political, religious and ethnic conflicts, for being skillful in this type of communication can be of benefit from a personal, social and professional standpoint. And, while these conversations might be uncomfortable; when done well, they can be beneficial in exploring important angles, unveiling truths and providing necessary context to situations [4]. These quality conversations across cultures illuminate and can be at the core of journalism's mission: "To provide people with information they need to understand their world" [4, p. 20].

To explore such worlds, exchanges between cultures helps to build this significant experience. How this occurs can be analyzed through the contextual model of intercultural communication. The model relies on the significance of context, which looks to consider what occurs when a person from one culture interacts with another [3]. The environment, the micro cultural and the cultural context play a role in these exchanges [3]. Furthermore, the sociorelational context connects the perceptual context, which helps to explore the relationship between the participants in the communication [3]. Through intercultural communication, also known as cross-cultural communication, people realize their own cultural differences and begin to shift their attitude and to explore being open-minded, empathetic and flexible [5].

Education has a similar mission to journalism. And through significant learning experiences, students can increase their “capability for living life fully and meaningfully” [2, p. 7]. This process of learning can be two-fold: It can assist students in expanding their understanding and interpretation of “discipline-related information,” and it aids them in developing their “life file” rather than a “course file” [2, p. 7].

Communication, journalism or strategic communication students must know how to not only do the work but also communicate well with people to create the work [6]. While Fink (2013) discusses a robust taxonomy of significant learning experiences, two emerge as being beneficial for this study: foundational knowledge, which includes certain principles and conventions of a discipline; and human dimension, which enables students to learn something not only about themselves but also others.

In journalism, specifically, knowing norms such as objectivity and key principles about the construction of a story through researching, interviewing, and writing serve as foundational. Then, the writer layers the piece with elements of the human experience, which remains important as well. To do so, understanding fault lines, a concept developed by Robert C. Maynard, helps the communicator to consider what perspectives and assumptions they bring into the story and use knowledge gained across fault lines to help inform their work [6].

## 2.2 Fashion Journalism Framework and Definition

For fashion journalism, this intercultural communication concept helps to provide depth and focus to its content. I have begun to explore the definition of fashion journalism in an effort to further define it in a digital and print field. A working definition has been developed. Wylie (2012) argues that “fashion journalism is the practice of writing about the textile industry. News stories, feature articles, analyses, business reports, consumer reports and ‘eye candy’ articles are all forms of fashion journalism” [7, p. 47]. While this list might be exhaustive, it does not denote “what is good fashion journalism?” and “what are best practices for writing about it effectively?” [7, p. 47]. Nevertheless, the following definition considers its various dimensions to begin the evaluative process of studying content:

Fashion journalism is the activity of ethically crafting and producing verified news that discusses dress through frameworks of class and culture; human social phenomenon; and the life cycle.

The working definition aids in further strengthening assignments in a course focused on fashion journalism.

### 2.3 Research Questions

How does a fashion journalism course assignment heighten intercultural communication skills for students at a Midwestern college? How do fashion journalism students interpret and understand their own fault lines and biases to help inform their approach to a story? How do the final stories feature foundational knowledge of storytelling and elements of human dimension about wearers of the hijab?

*Methodology.* The “Cultural Analysis” assignment is done later in the semester in an effort to as Rios and Perry (2016) note to create “excellence, which means stories have context, complexity, voices, authenticity and proportionality” [6, p. 5]. The assignment has been framed in ways to allow students to seek interviews with people who wear the hijab. I brought in speakers to onboard them to the culture, then students went out and found their own sources and interviewed them.

Students will be interviewed about their answers to a questionnaire, developed from researching the concept regarding “fault lines” and bias. The sample will include students from two years in the Fashion Journalism course. I have been teaching the assignment unit for several years and will include a textual analysis of some of the papers produced for the course.

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