The Pinterest project: 
Using social media in an undergraduate second year fashion design course at a United States University

ABSTRACT
This article is a research evaluation of a project that utilizes the social media website, Pinterest.com, in a collaborative learning experience between second year fashion design students at a United States university and young urban professionals as customers. Technology is changing the higher education environment, and interacting with social media in engaging ways provides fashion design students the opportunity to connect with a wider community of customers to better understand their needs. Second year students in a fashion design course at a university in the United States were asked to collaborate with young urban professional customers using the website Pinterest.com to develop a six-piece garment collection based on the customer’s inspiration and feedback of the student designs. Student responses suggest this was beneficial experience for using social media in a learning environment. Communication between students and customers illustrate an example for interactive social media use that could be replicated in other fashion design courses.
INTRODUCTION
This article uses a project-based assignment to illustrate an active learning approach that encourages collaboration between second year fashion design students and young urban professionals in a social media environment. While students in higher education may participate in online communities on their own time, most social media use in the classroom is less engaging. Selwyn (2011: 6) states, ‘Recent empirical studies of student social media use highlight a lack of what could be considered authentic or even useful participative learning activity’. This research evaluation of a project-based fashion design assignment will demonstrate an example of a participative learning activity in an online social media environment. Part one highlights the current setting of social media use for faculty and students in higher education and emphasizes a need for collaborative, engaging activity. Part two describes the project-based fashion design assignment and outlines the process of the project. Further, student feedback related to the project was analysed to illustrate benefits of learning in a collaborative social media environment. Feedback suggested students were focused on the customer, enjoyed working in groups using social media and had positive critique experience with peers. In order to continue to relate to students, the presence of social media is strongly indicated in higher education settings (Selwyn 2011: 2). This article establishes an example for incorporating social media in a collaborative learning environment in higher education.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT
Higher education institutions are too focused on traditional learning systems instead of fully embracing the pedagogical advantages social media can offer students to regulate their own learning activities and connect to peers beyond time and place (McGloughlin and Lee 2010; Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2011). A university ‘is no longer confined within its own buildings’ and the ability to deliver course content in outreach colleges, the workplace, or online changes learning to ‘distributed, flexible, and blended’ (Lea 2005: 180). Social media is driving this shift to a joint approach of sharing knowledge. Internet use as a collective activity describes social media applications as ‘open rather than closed, bottom-up rather than top-down’ with the ability for users to ‘share and rate, mash-up and remix, friend and trend’ (Selwyn 2011: 1). These social networking technologies can further encourage students to apply cognitive skills to problem-solving situations in digital environments (Duffy and Bruns 2006: 31). This ‘on demand’ learning encourages constant searching and sharing of information through digital and networked technologies where learners are ‘active co-producers of content’ instead of ‘passive information consumers’ (Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2012: 3). Social media has transformed the learning process to a highly self-motivated activity making an important contribution to college experiences (McGloughlin and Lee 2010; Dabbagh and Kitsantas 2012).

Increasing social media use is changing higher education learning specifically for the creative art disciplines. Boyd (2012) found that students attending a small, specialist art institution discussed explicit learning needs focused on autonomy, access to community and uncomplicated interactions with technology. This combination of autonomy and community in online discussion encourages creative collaboration in art disciplines. According to Black (2005) these interactions of online conversations within a community positively impact creativity and critical thinking. As an example, Sykes (2012) further indicates that students from the creative advertising discipline welcome
the opportunity to work collaboratively online and the majority agrees opportunities like this add to the success of the creative work. Collaborative learning experiences using social media take advantage of the changing relationship students have with technology.

THE CHANGING STUDENT

Evidence of the importance of social media for students in higher education is increasing. The Pew Internet and American Life Project’s national survey on uses of social networking sites by US youth found 41% of 12–13-year-olds and 61% of 14–17-year-olds are active on social media websites (Lenhart and Madden 2007). In The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2011, the Higher Education Research Institute highlights 94.8% of high school seniors spend time using social media (Pryor et al. 2012: 13). By the time students enter college, social media is intertwined with everyday life. Ulbrich et al. explain,

Members of the net generation use the web differently, they network differently, and they learn differently. When they start at university, traditional values on how to develop knowledge collide with their values. Many of the teaching techniques that have worked for decades do not work anymore because new students learn differently too. The net generation is used to networking; its members work collaboratively, they execute several tasks simultaneously, and they use the web to acquire knowledge. (2010)

Students in higher education are becoming more flexible based on ‘highly connected, collective and creative qualities of social media applications’ (Selwyn 2011: 2). It further revolutionizes the way this generation learns, communicates and constructs their identities both online and to the outside world (Brenton 2008 85). Students of the net generation intuitively use web technology to discover knowledge in a social manner. Brenton says,

They chat on MSN Messenger in bedrooms, labs and libraries, share views and information on Facebook, search out journal articles and secondary sources through a popular search engine rather than through their institutions’ e-journal subscriptions, and share comments, tips and even their work on mobile devices in the palms of their hands. (2009: 95)

This new generation of students thrives in online environments where they can actively engage in learning communities. These online communal networks are inspiring to students and should be included in the educational experience as motivation for learning (Mason and Rennie 2007: 199). According to an EDUCAUSE survey, students will expect faculty members to make better use of information technology in order to communicate in the future (Kvavik and Caruso 2005).

NEED FOR FACULTY ADAPTATION AND CHANGE

Faculty members in higher education are also increasingly taking advantage of social media, but with a narrow approach. In a study by Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group, 80 per cent of faculty utilized social media in some way to support their courses (Moran et al. 2011: 12).
The survey cites online video as the most common type of social media used in education with only 20 per cent of faculty assigning students to respond online (Moran et al. 2011: 12). Online video in this way is used as a reactive method of information transmission outside of the classroom. The majority of YouTube and Wikipedia users choose to passively consume content instead of contribute (Selwyn 2011: 6).

Despite large faculty use of social media in the classroom, more interactive ways to explore and generate content could be applied in higher education. Educators at higher institutions are expected to keep up with the world of social media applications and their users through a ‘considered and objective’ approach (Selwyn 2011: 1). Duffy and Bruns (2006: 31) state, ‘it is no longer sufficient to use online learning and teaching technologies simply for the delivery of content’. Pressure is growing on the formal curriculum to engage student learning in informal learning through ‘the participatory culture of the internet’ (Bass 2012). There are additional opportunities to benefit from the collaborative and conversational nature of social media. It is when content is shared through social media that information exchange takes full advantage of inviting conversation and invoking industry, societal and global change (Moran et al. 2011: 4). Educators can connect to students more effectively by employing strategies that take advantage of their social networking skills (Barnes et al. 2007).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Students, a tutor and retail customers came together in this project to create an explorative learning environment through an online community using the website Pinterest.com. The objective in this fashion design assignment was for students to utilize customers’ online inspiration boards in their design process. Initial designs by students would be posted online and customers would comment on the designs and suggest revisions. This way the customers have the expert opinions and the students and tutor share in a meaning making process to better serve the customers’ needs. This student-centred approach focuses on learning development through ‘the participatory culture of the internet’ (Bass 2012). There are additional opportunities to benefit from the collaborative and conversational nature of social media. It is when content is shared through social media that information exchange takes full advantage of inviting conversation and invoking industry, societal and global change (Moran et al. 2011: 4). Educators can connect to students more effectively by employing strategies that take advantage of their social networking skills (Barnes et al. 2007).

CUSTOMER INITIATED INSPIRATION

A tutor responsible for this project communicated with two female customers aged between 25 and 30 years who enthusiastically agreed to participate. These customers created individual inspiration boards using the website...
Pinterest.com. Pinterest is a photo-sharing website that enables users to catalogue inspirational finds and ideas for events, hobbies and general lifestyle. The customers were advised to pin items that reflected their personal aesthetic to the virtual pinboard. Customers avoided pinning clothing items to prevent students from directly copying a specific garment. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of a customer’s board. Common items virtually pinned to the board included favourite products, inspirational typography, recipes, home interior aspirations, colourful art and lifestyle photography.

**STUDENTS’ DESIGN ANALYSIS OF THE CUSTOMER**

The tutor provided students a photo of the customers with demographics highlighting age, job title, salary range and geographic location. Figure 2 illustrates the basic customer profile page given to students. (Some personal information has been omitted.) A link to the customer’s Pinterest board was sent to each group of students. The class was split in half and assigned either customer #1 or customer #2. Students created an analysis of the customer’s personal aesthetic based on design principles. The student teams identified specific colour combinations, general shaping and form, distinct textures and use of line in the customer’s Pinterest board. Students also predicted the customer’s favourite brands and further described psychographics based on imagery on the Pinterest board.

**STUDENTS DESIGN A COLLECTION FOR CUSTOMERS WITH FACULTY GUIDANCE**

Using the design analysis and customer’s Pinterest board, students developed concepts for a six-piece garment collection. Each customer’s Pinterest board guided the research for colour and fabric inspiration of the student collections. The student teams compiled ideas in a sketchbook to articulate silhouette
and garment details based on the customer’s imagery. Using sketchbooks for designing apparel is a common practice in fashion design assignments. Sketchbooks provide ‘essential information to your tutor’ that demonstrates interaction with the world and shows creative thinking (Seivewright 2007: 84). Referencing the Pinterest board was a reminder for students to develop ideas based on the customer’s personal aesthetic. Student teams evaluated garment concepts with the tutor and narrowed ideas to complete a versatile six-piece collection consisting of both tops and bottoms. Front and back flat sketches of the finalized six garment ideas were created in Adobe Illustrator.

**PEER REVIEW CRITIQUE**

Before the collections were posted to Pinterest, a peer critique was held during class. It is suggested that a beneficial opportunity for learning in a critique comes from letting the students discuss the work amongst each other (Shreeve et al. 2008: 351). Students who designed for customer #1 presented their collections. Customer #1’s Pinterest board was projected on a screen with the student collections in order to identify the most appropriate designs. Students discussed which garments they thought customer #1 would want to purchase. They voiced opinions and the most popular garments were noted. The process helped students focus on the customer instead of their own personal preferences. This critique process was repeated with the student design collections for customer #2.

**POSTING DESIGNS ON PINTEREST FOR CUSTOMER FEEDBACK**

The student teams submitted their designs in digital format as jpegs to the tutor. The tutor uploaded the designs to the appropriate customer Pinterest board. After the designs were uploaded, the customers were notified to make comments on the student work. Specifically, they commented if they
would buy a particular garment and if not, provided reasons for disinterest in purchasing. The customers also suggested revisions to make the designs better suited to their tastes. Example responses from the customer are following. ‘Not sure thick corduroy and cut of pants would suit my body shape’. ‘Love the Japanese style influence, wish it would include a unique pocket or subtle textured patch somewhere’. Each customer’s favourite garments were compared with the best garments noted in the peer critique to evaluate how students understood their customers. Figure 3 illustrates some garment designs along with feedback from the customer.

**STUDENT REVIEWS OF PROJECT**

After the project was finished, students were asked to give anonymous feedback on the course assignment. Students were directed to answer open-ended questions about learning outcomes outlined in the design brief and provide any additional thoughts about the assignment. In class students were given a consent form and a list of questions to answer regarding the Pinterest Project. The signed consent forms were returned and the written feedback was collected anonymously in the tutor’s mailbox at a later date. Of the eleven students enrolled in the course, nine provided detailed feedback about the project. The student responses were coded with numbers based on the order of when each student’s feedback was returned. For example, S1 would be the code for the first student to hand in feedback.

First, thematic analysis was used to become familiar with the data and to create open codes from student responses. The second level of analysis established categories relating to target customers, real-life situations, group work, social media and design critique. These five categories were refined in the third level of analysis using a Grounded Theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to identify emerging themes within the student responses.
Another researcher within the university also reviewed the themes to provide additional reliability. The two major themes revealed through the analysis focused on (1) designing for an actual customer in a real world scenario and (2) benefits of group work as preparation for work in the fashion industry. Two secondary themes apparent in the analysis were (3) appreciation of using Pinterest.com and (4) positive critique experience. There was an overall positive response for involvement in the Pinterest project. One student said, ‘I think it’s a project that a lot of students would benefit from and would really enjoy’. The main themes discovered from the students’ comments illustrate applicable learning benefits that could be replicated in other learning environments to engage social media in higher education.

**DESIGNING FOR A SPECIFIC CUSTOMER**

In fashion design, ideas for clothing relate to the market and customers who will wear the garments in the future. For this reason, having a real customer provide feedback to students about particular design concepts was deemed a valuable learning experience in this feedback.

S7: I really liked being able to design clothing for a real customer. It helped me understand what designing for a certain demographic would be like.

The real-life feedback set up in this fashion design assignment pushed students to understand their particular customer. The student response below emphasizes how important customer research was in this assignment.

S9: This project took lots of research to understand the customer because we couldn’t design things that only we would like to purchase. We had to think of our customer.

Students appreciated the opportunity for customers to evaluate designs and acknowledged this prevented potential bias from the tutor. Customers serving as assessors of designs enabled the tutor and students to collaborate in an experience where developed skills had meaning in a real world context. By emphasizing collective participation the expert tutor is transformed from ‘one of centrality to a position of supporter and co-participant in practice’ (Shreeve 2007: 13). This kept students focused on designing for their specific customer. The following student response illustrates this point.

S3: The Pinterest Project was helpful when designing for an actual person. Feedback from the customer was also good because it was a completely un-biased opinion based solely on our ability to design for that person.

Students specifically referred to how the Pinterest website represented their particular customer through visuals and further illustrated how valuable the imagery was to understanding and designing specifically for their customer. Both of the below responses articulate the importance of the visuals in learning about their customer.

S4: I think it was extremely useful to use a real customer when we were creating the designs for our clothing. The Pinterest board helped me get an idea of the likes and dislikes of the customer.

S8: Using a real customer on Pinterest definitely helped me better understand how to design for a specific demographic. This was because the provided images represented the customer’s personal aesthetic. These images created a visual customer profile, which from a design perspective was helpful in getting to know the customer.
BENEFITS OF WORKING IN GROUPS

Students who participated in this fashion design assignment stated that they found it beneficial to work in groups because it reflected a common experience in the fashion industry. Undergraduate textile and apparel curricula frequently use team-based projects as a method for collaborative learning because it provides an opportunity to simulate a working environment that is comparable to the apparel industry (Karpova et al. 2011).

S1: I think working in groups helped me understand how the fashion industry works. I learned how to work outside the classroom and schedule meetings with my classmates to make sure we were on the same page.

Through this assignment, students expressed how collaboration with others in the design process was valuable. The ability to share ideas with someone else was a beneficial experience. The following comments from students reflect these involvements.

S4: I think it was a great group project. It was nice to be able to bounce ideas off to someone else as well as collaborate together.

S5: This was my first design project where I was required to work with another person. It opened my eyes to the diversity another mind can bring to an idea. Also, it provided a real-life scenario to the working world, where you must constantly work with others to arrive at a cohesive concept.

Other students communicated useful methods they learned about working in groups regarding the responsibilities of each group member. The student responses below articulate the importance of utilizing each group members’ strengths.

S6: It is best to have an even amount of work, but to also take into consideration the strengths in each group member. In the real world we do not only work on our own, but in collaboration with other people. Incorporating this in the classroom makes students understand how projects may unravel in the real world.

S8: This project actually helped me to work better in groups. What I took from the project was that each person should be working on what he or she is good at. The shared outcome is more important than individual work.

USING PINTEREST IN AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Students commented on the usefulness of the social media website, Pinterest.com, in an educational experience. The nature of the responses indicated that the website was easy and enjoyable to use.

S2: Using Pinterest for a clothing design assignment was a good idea and really fun to use. It helped the design process by being able to look at the customer’s pins and see her interests. Pinterest has become such a popular site and would be a great way to reach out to customers.

S7: It was very helpful because the Pinterest board was a virtual mood board. It is a great idea to use social media in design projects because it is the way of the future.

The Pinterest boards used in this educational assignment were public and open for anyone in the Pinterest community to view. This provided students an opportunity to have global feedback about their designs. One student expresses this in the following comment.

S4: Posting designs on Pinterest allowed for other people not involved in the project to give feedback beyond the specific customer feedback we received.
A POSITIVE CRITIQUE EXPERIENCE

Students participating in this fashion assignment were focused on how their customer would evaluate their designs. This placed less attention on the tutor as evaluator. It is apparent that when a tutor places less emphasis on authority it opens communication for free flowing discussion in a critique (Griffiths 2008: 78). Further, Percy (2004) sites one of the problems with critiques in a design field is too often the critic is responsible for the assessment that discourages an inviting and inquisitive discussion between students. Placing the customer as a critic in an online environment helped to strengthen a more open and objective critique. The following student responses express how this critique was beneficial.

S9: I think the feedback in the peer critique was useful in keeping focus on what the customer would want, and gave us an idea of what we might need to change in our designs.

S5: In the critique, I found it easier to make conclusions about what items the customer might buy from studying her Pinterest board. It was clear that some silhouettes and elements applied to garments were better suited for the customer than others. Much of this ideology came from the colours and textures, as well as settings of the images from which one could guess the types of activities the customer would partake in on a daily basis. Therefore, it was easier to critique which garments the customer would most likely choose to purchase.

This project will be repeated in future classes as a result of the positive feedback on student learning. The online Pinterest boards will be used as examples to illustrate critical feedback from a customer as it relates to the design process. According to student feedback, the project will be revised to include additional tips for group work provided by past students and require a more detailed customer design analysis based on the Pinterest board. The Pinterest boards can be viewed online through the following links www.pinterest.com/kendralouisem/student-project-1 and www.pinterest.com/kendralouisem/student-project-2.

CONCLUSION

This fashion design assignment uses social media in an interactive learning environment to support a collaborative approach for student learning. Encouraging interaction through specified points of contact between customers and students contributed to establishing the online community. By involving a real customer in the design process, students could openly collaborate with a tutor to best serve the customer needs. In this scenario the customer held the ‘expert’ opinion on design ideas and the tutor’s role was one of supporter. This places students with an active role in learning to design in a real world setting with an actual customer. Shreeve et al. (2008: 348) suggest that visual arts learning activities should include projects that simulate industry conditions to provide equal access for similar student experience. When students are given the opportunity to develop professional skills through engaging in real-life problem solving, they establish meaningful understanding of the tutor’s intention for learning activities. These problem-based experiences are generally welcomed by students with great enthusiasm (Biggs and Tang 2007: 37).

Using social media for a project-based fashion design assignment in an online environment is not without its challenges though. Educators do have some reservations about using social media in higher education. Moran et al.
The Pinterest project

(2011) cite most faculty are concerned of the time commitment of using social media and rate integrity of student submissions and student privacy as the two main pressing issues. Using social media is challenging because it, ‘can stray very close to a culture of plagiarism’ Brenton (2008: 95). Despite these concerns, the benefits of collaborative learning on social media are acknowledged as a worthwhile venture for higher education (Moran et al. 2011; Brenton 2008). The Pinterest Project was a rewarding collaborative endeavour and was structured to eliminate some of the major concerns of using social media in higher education. Coordination of the Pinterest Project was time efficient because it only required the tutor to e-mail the customers twice and pin the student designs to the inspiration board. Integrity of the student submissions was ensured through the individual and unique designs created by the students.

Social media can be used in interactive ways to support collaborative learning in higher education if students are required to move beyond passively consuming additional course content. Pinterest.com provided an easy to use online environment for students to actively analyse a real customer, post design content and gain necessary feedback. Duffy and Bruns (2006) point to the popularity of these photo-sharing websites as a growth in personal expression and highlight developments in using them in an educational context. Using social media can contribute to ‘an enhanced capacity to self-organize’, and young people are used to having more control over how, when and where they do things (Selwyn 2011: 2). This fashion design assignment contributes to these advancements with an example for using social media in higher education in an active approach for students, a tutor and retail customers. Using Pinterest.com in this collaborative way could be replicated in other courses in higher education, specifically those that focus on understanding customers and target markets. This may be especially true for coursework in fashion design, industrial design, branding and business.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED CITATION


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