

Urban athletes

‘One of our greatest successes was to get sports shoes and apparel out of the gym and on to the street.’

The obfuscation begins very soon after you have made contact with one of the sportswear brands. ‘I’m not sure how much we can help you with your book,’ says a European spokeswoman from Nike, with whom I am not officially having this conversation. ‘You see, Nike isn’t really about fashion, it’s about sports. Our focus is on technology.’

The chat that isn’t happening is taking place in a loft-style open-plan space called the Nike Studio, tucked away in an obscure corner of Paris. I had trouble finding it, because the exterior is discreet to the point of enigmatic. The only indication that it belongs to Nike is a single Swoosh, no bigger than the radius of your palm, beside the door. There are other outposts of the Nike Studio in Milan, London and Berlin, and similar concepts in Los Angeles and New York. They are used for product launches and aching hip multimedia events designed to federate young opinion-leaders around the Nike brand. Nike describes them as ‘a meeting point between culture and sport’. The company doesn’t talk about them much, because it wants to keep them exclusive. It all sounds suspiciously like fashion branding to me.

On the other hand, it’s true that most sports brands occupy a very different place in the fashion universe from, say, Yves Saint Laurent. While designer labels shy away from mass communication, brands such

as Nike and Adidas retain the services of global advertising agencies and use the full gamut of promotional tools, from costly TV campaigns to guerrilla marketing. Nike, the leading name in the market with an estimated 35 per cent share, has a turnover of more than US\$12.3 billion a year. Its annual spend on advertising is around US\$300 million and rising (Adbrands.net). Add sponsorship and endorsement deals into the equation, and the figure tops US\$1 billion. The figures mustered by the designer brands are minuscule in comparison. But sportswear is a commodity. While designer brands are keen to retain their air of elitism, it's fair to say that Nike has much more in common with McDonald's than it does with Chanel.

My friendly but anonymous spokeswoman disappears back to base, having assured me that 'a senior Nike marketing executive' will respond to my questions by e-mail.

Here is my first question: 'When did sports shoes and other sportswear start crossing over to become streetwear? Did Nike and its competitors encourage this, or was it a creation of the street itself?'

And here is the answer, from Phil McAveety, vice-president of marketing for Europe, Middle East and Africa: 'Our approach has always been based first and foremost on the product. If a product does not perform, there is a problem. Performance technologies have therefore always been at the heart of Nike, right back to when Bill Bowerman and Phil Knight founded the company, and Bill Bowerman took his wife's waffle iron and poured rubber into it to make an outsole for a running shoe. . . This quest for functional innovation has never stopped and the company has been synonymous with product innovations.'

The response may not be the one I was looking for, but it certainly tells us a lot about the positioning Nike has established in order to market its products. Tom Vanderbilt's excellent *The Sneaker Book* (1998) observes, 'Statistics routinely claim that roughly 80 per cent of athletic-shoe wearers will not use them for any kind of sporting pursuit. Still, sneaker companies strive to have top athletes as their standard-bearers and work to develop technologies that sound reasonably advanced, yet make sense to the consumer.'

Vanderbilt points out that sportswear companies have sound economic reasons for taking this approach: 'The image of athletic integrity can imbue an entire line with a positive aura; a "fashion" perception, meanwhile, can spark a trend or draw new customers, but is perceived as risky in the long term.'

Nike's stance is a shining example of this philosophy. Adidas, the second-largest brand in the market, has flirted with fashion more overtly; Puma has fully embraced it. In any case, whatever the sportswear companies might claim, their products are a key element of fashion. All of us wear sports shoes – to work, to clubs, to pubs. They are collected and cherished. They are status symbols. Their wearers have occasionally been shot dead for them. Sports shoes have become an integral part of our lives – and sportswear has developed alongside them. To find out how this happened, we need to go back more than 150 years.

GETTING ON TRACK

At school, we used to call them 'plimsolls'. It was a wonderfully onomatopoeic word, evoking the squeak of rubber on a gymnasium floor. Later on, when we got older, they became 'trainers'. Americans call them 'sneakers' or 'kicks'. In France, they're known as *baskets* (italics obligatory), because of their association with basketball. In historical terms, at least, we British kids got it right the first time. According to Vanderbilt, in 19th-century England the soft shoes used for tennis and other lawn sports were nicknamed 'plimsolls' because the line bonding sole to upper resembled the mark on a ship – named after the British parliamentarian Samuel Plimsoll – indicating correct cargo weight.

The sports shoe was made possible by the American inventor Charles Goodyear's 'vulcanization' process, patented in 1839, which involved mixing rubber with sulphur and heating it. This transformed sticky, easily malleable raw rubber into a substance that was both flexible and impervious, springing back into shape when bent. The early 20th century saw the launch of two sports-shoe brands: Reebok, produced in England by Joseph Foster from 1900, and Converse, founded by Marquis M. Converse in Massachusetts in 1908. In 1923, the Converse All-Star shoe became associated with semi-professional basketball player Charles 'Chuck' Taylor. In addition, Taylor was a salesman for the company, so he was able to tour the States demonstrating the shoes and selling them at the same time. These days, sports stars are not expected to go on the road and physically sell the products they are associated with, although the principle remains the same.

Also in the 1920s, the term ‘sportswear’ was already beginning to enter the fashion lexicon. In the United States, items previously associated with tennis and yachting – flannel trousers, short-sleeved shirts, jerseys and caps – began to infiltrate everyday wardrobes. For the leisured classes, they expressed nonchalance and liberty. Soon they found their way into the collections of designers like Chanel and Schiaparelli. To this day, many designer brands include a ‘sport’ line in their range.

In general, though, sportswear brands grew out of the early sports-shoe market. The leading names have proved as resilient as the soles of their products. Adidas can trace its roots back to 1926, when the brothers Adolf and Rudi Dassler established their sports-shoe business in Herzogenaurach, Germany. In 1928, their shoes were worn by athletes at the Amsterdam Olympics. In 1936, track and field champion Jesse Owens won four gold medals in them. (The black athlete famously scuppered Hitler’s plans to use the German games as a showcase for ‘Aryan’ superiority.)

At the outbreak of war, the brothers’ factory was commandeered for the manufacturing of army boots. While Adolf Dassler struggled to keep a hold on the family business, Rudi joined the army, eventually being captured by the Allies. He was repatriated in 1947, by which time his brother was doing a brisk trade providing boots to the occupying US army. The pair’s wartime experiences are said to have caused the split that pushed them to go their separate ways. Adolf (Adi) created the Adidas brand (from the first syllables of his given and family names) while Rudi founded Puma. The two brands became fierce rivals.

While Puma struggled for years, Adidas went from strength to strength, eventually dominating both soccer and the Olympics. Its success on the football field stemmed from its development of the first boots with screw-in studs, which provided better control, and were worn by the West German team during the 1954 World Cup. By the 1960s Adidas was the only global sports brand, having expanded smoothly into sports clothing, bags and equipment. In 1970, its branded football became the official ball of all international tournaments – a position it has yet to relinquish.

At around the same period, the sports shoe was continuing its slow evolution into lifestyle accessory, first as an accoutrement of rock and roll, then as a cooler alternative to stiff traditional footwear. The movie industry, as usual, helped. Tom Vanderbilt points out that the Jets and

the Sharks of *West Side Story* (1961) were clad in sneakers. Later, he adds, Dustin Hoffman wore them to the office in the film *All the President's Men* (1976).

The 1970s was the decade when jogging came to the fore as a leisure activity, helping to nudge sportswear further into the mainstream. It was a market in which Puma's products proved especially popular, enabling it to gain ground on Adidas for the first time. But trouble had materialized for both brands in the form of a brash young upstart called Nike.

Phil Knight, a former member of the University of Oregon track team, started out selling Japanese Onitsuka Tiger running shoes from the back of his car. While still at university, Knight had written a paper describing how the market dominance of Adidas could be broken by importing lower-cost sports shoes from Japan. He teamed up with his former coach, Bill Bowerman, to set up Blue Ribbon sports. With the Tiger shoes selling reasonably well, the pair opened their first retail outlet in 1966. Five years later, wanting more control over his inventory, Knight paid a design student called Caroline Davidson US\$35 to come up with a logo that he could put on shoe boxes. 'I don't love it, but it will grow on me,' he said of her 'swoosh' design.

However, as Nike's website is careful to set straight, the pair's collaboration didn't end there. Davidson continued to work for the company until it hired a full-time advertising agency. Later, she was presented with an envelope containing Nike stock. 'How much stock remains a secret between Knight and her,' the site adds (www.nike.com/nikebiz).

The Swoosh would begin its rise to omnipresence when Andre Agassi won the men's tennis championship at Wimbledon in 1992. Nike had been experimenting with baseball caps and other clothing that bore the logo alone, dispensing with the brand name. Pictures of Agassi wearing just such a cap appeared on front pages around the world, creating an instant trend. Nike's designers quickly became conscious of the fact that the Swoosh transcended language barriers – it was the perfect global branding device.

Knight and Bowerman ended their deal with Tiger and began making their own trainers in 1972. Their first shoe, the Nike – named after the Greek goddess of victory – proved such a hit at the US Olympic trials that it prompted them to change the name of the company. Another early success was the waffle trainer, born out of the anecdote recounted

earlier. By 1980, when Nike went public, the company had snatched more than 50 per cent of the American sports-shoe market. The strategy of delocalizing production to Asia had enabled it to undercut Adidas's prices. And in a foretaste of technological claims to come, Nike also promoted an air-cushioning system, designed by a former NASA engineer, which supposedly gave the wearer extra bounce. Nike's rivals were squeezed between the pincers of cheap labour and expensive branding – although it didn't take them long to catch on (see Chapter 21: Behind the seams).

The market changed for good in 1984, when Nike beat Adidas to sign up basketball star Michael Jordan to wear its shoes. Tom Vanderbilt explains his appeal: 'Freshly bedecked with Olympic gold, likeable and telegenic, Jordan seemed capable of delivering basketball to the entire country. With this possibility in mind. . . [his agent] was able to wring from Nike the largest basketball endorsement then signed – roughly US\$2.5 million over five years.'

Nike Air Jordans entered sports-shoe mythology. In 1987, Nike's advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy launched the 'Just do it' campaign. Combined with Jordan's charismatic presence and a series of high-impact TV ads – diffused by an ever-expanding international media – the slogan turned Nike into a global brand. The company was the first to blend MTV-style imagery, pop music and sport, creating a real buzz when it set a commercial to the Beatles song 'Revolution'.

Vanderbilt adds, 'From Jordan on, the creation of a persona with strong, readily identifiable characteristics would be as important to the shoe companies as it was to the NBA. Since most basketball-shoe consumers did not play basketball, the shoes clearly had an appeal beyond their functional attributes – a fact that shoe companies were slow to pick up on, but then pursued with abandon.'

The 1980s were as unkind to Adidas as they were kind to Nike. Adi Dassler had died in 1978, at the peak of his company's success, and his son Horst had taken over the running of the business. Adidas now found itself locking horns not only with Nike, but also with British outsider Reebok, which was gaining market share in giant strides. Reebok proved particularly adept at spotting and capturing the emerging aerobics market, which even Nike had failed to anticipate due to its male-oriented, sports-star culture.

Horst Dassler died in 1987 and the Adidas company was bought by French entrepreneur and politician Bernard Tapie. Tapie soon became

embroiled in a corruption scandal, and he was forced to let go of the ailing sports brand. In 1993, crippled by debt, Adidas found itself in the hands of the French bank *Crédit Lyonnais*. It was bailed out by Robert-Louis Dreyfus, former chairman of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi.

With an ad-man's flair for enhancing brands, Dreyfus slowly nursed Adidas back to health. He restructured the company, closed expensive European production plants, and placed the design emphasis back on the three-stripped logo and accompanying 'trefoil' device, which had been inexplicably abandoned. Over the past few years, the brand's three-pronged strategy has focused on professional sports footwear, consumer-oriented sports heritage ('vintage'-inspired styles), and fashion, hence its partnerships with Yohji Yamamoto and Stella McCartney (see Chapter 2: Fashioning an identity). While it still lags behind Nike with worldwide sales of about US\$5.5 billion, Adidas has none the less achieved a phenomenal comeback.

Difficult though it may be to believe, Nike has also had its share of ups and downs. The 1990s began promisingly enough, with the opening of the first Niketown superstore, selling the full range of clothing and shoes, in Portland, Oregon. It signed up an unbeatable team of celebrity endorsers – including, in 1995, Tiger Woods – and moved aggressively into soccer, a sector strongly associated with Adidas, by setting up a sponsorship deal with the Brazilian national team. Then, unexpectedly, Nike was hit by a triple whammy. In 1998, France symbolically beat Brazil in Paris in the World Cup. During the same period, the press was filled with stories criticizing labour practices in Asia, where workers in appalling conditions were paid minuscule sums to make shoes that sold for over US\$100. Proof that Nike shoes were more about fashion than sport came when youngsters began abandoning them in favour of sturdy work boots. Sales in the United States plummeted, and when the Asian economy stalled, Nike was hit by another broadside.

Nike was not prepared to lie down and die, however. It made highly publicized efforts to clean up its Asian production issues, it reshuffled its management team, and it modernized and streamlined its distribution process. When Michael Jordan retired from sport in 2000, Nike refocused on the consumer, with brand communication stressing that even an everyday slob could be a hero. This strategy also enabled the brand to place more emphasis on its apparel, something it had viewed purely as a second-string business a few years earlier. While it

still retained the services of athletes such as the basketball star LeBron James (signed up in 2003 for a staggering US\$90 million, according to press reports), its award-winning advertisements – ‘Tag’, ‘Musical Chairs’ and ‘Hotdog’ – featured ordinary people, whose Nike footwear gave them an edge in urban environments. As a key line on Nike’s website reads, ‘If you have a body, you are an athlete. And as long as there are athletes, there will be Nike.’

There will be Converse, too. In summer 2003, Nike snapped up the 95-year-old footwear brand for US\$305 million. Converse had dominated the basketball-shoe market from the 1920s to the 70s, but by the end of the 1990s it was regarded as little more than a charming relic: low-profile ownership, zero celebrity endorsement, no flashy advertising, and minimal sales. The company filed for bankruptcy in 2001 and was briefly acquired by private investors before being sold to Nike.

The news upset remaining Converse fans, because its ‘All-Stars’ shoes had traditionally been seen as the footwear of the American counter-culture, having been passed down from the early rockers to The Ramones, Nirvana, and a whole new generation of black-wearing, guitar-clutching wannabes. The fact that Converse had failed to keep pace with modern marketing or design initiatives only endeared it to these rebels. Discovering that Nike had bought Converse was ‘like hearing Elvis Costello had started writing jingles for Microsoft’, wrote Rob Walker of online magazine *Slate*. But, with low-tech retro styles back in fashion, Nike had made a typically deft move, buying itself a slice of history. ‘Converse really does have an authentic heritage, and the company is smart to make that a selling point,’ Walker admitted. (‘What’s up, Chucks?’, www.slate.msn.com, 15 September 2003.)

A few months after the purchase, Converse released an advertising campaign narrated by the rapper Mos Def. The shoes were seen on famous feet, and fashion editors began to write about how they’d been wearing Converse for years. In the background, those in the know could hear the roar of a marketing machine getting into high gear. Before long, the shoes were everywhere again.

Nike owns other brands, too, including Nike Golf, Bauer Nike Hockey and, most surprisingly of all, smart formal-shoe brand Cole Haan, which it acquired more than 15 years ago.

In December 2004, Nike founder Phil Knight stepped down as head of the company after 32 years, bringing an era to a close. Although he remains chairman, he was replaced as president and chief executive

by William Perez, the former chief executive of S C Johnson & Son, a company best known for furniture polish. Under Knight's watch, the humble sports-shoe market had been transformed into a global multi-billion-dollar industry combining elements of sport, entertainment and fashion. 'He created an entire industry [of sports merchandizing] basically on his own,' commented Marc Ganis, president of Sportscorp Ltd, a Chicago consulting firm, in *The Washington Post*. 'By and large he's made athletes richer, he's made athletic footwear and athletic clothing a luxury item, and he has turned a small company in Oregon. . . into an international goliath.' ('Father of Nike, marketing guru, gives up post', 19 November 2004.)

EXPECT A GADGET

Take a look at the following comment from Phil McAveety, VP marketing EMEA at Nike: 'Because of what they stand for. . . products can sometimes become iconic. For example, the Dunk made its debut in 1986. . . The Dunk was designed specifically with the awe-inspiring basketball move after which it is named [in mind]. It features a unique low-profile sidewall that reduces weight to enable players to focus on their game. The concentric-circle-patterned forefoot with flex grooves incorporates maximum traction for better grip, flexibility and ease of rotation during pivoting. The Dunk. . . went on to inspire other product developments in sports outside basketball, like skateboarding.'

The key to the comment lies in the language: 'Concentric-circle-patterned forefoot with flex grooves incorporates maximum traction for better grip, flexibility and ease of rotation.' It's a typical example of the techno-speak that sportswear brands, particularly Nike, use to seduce consumers. Even though we're only going to wear our sports shoes to the supermarket, we could, if we wanted, make a leap for that cereal packet on the top shelf.

According to Tom Vanderbilt, 'Athletic shoes are to other shoes as sports utility vehicles are to other cars: large, loaded with impressive but rarely-used options, a statement less of need than of desire.'

Phil Knight's oft-quoted comment that 'the design elements and functional characteristics of the product itself are just a part of the overall marketing process,' originally made to *The Harvard Business Review* in 1992, clearly still holds sway.

Despite the mind-scrambling jargon used to describe the shoes, technological advances basically amount to little more than adjustments in weight and cushioning. But experts have determined that cushioning might actually be bad for runners, as if they're constantly struggling against soft sand, ultimately damaging their knees. Help is at hand, though, because Nike has come full circle with a product called the Nike Free. It's a shoe that – wait for it – mirrors the advantages of *running with bare feet*. Or, as McAveety puts it, 'mimics the benefits of barefoot training'. He adds, 'It's an amazing development that took many years of research and will challenge the way we think about footwear.'

One's mind reels at the presumptuousness of the idea: sports shoes that feel like you're not wearing shoes at all. But you pay for them, all the same.

STARS AND STREETS

Two trends that were prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s – sports shoes without laces and oversized jeans worn so low that the wearer's underwear waistband is visible – have something in common. They were both started by criminals. When you're flung in jail, you're forced to hand over your belt and your shoelaces, in case you feel like committing suicide in your cell, or maybe strangling one of your cell-mates. Since a spell in the joint was considered mandatory by many rappers, the style became a sign of fellowship.

This kind of cool, hard, urban imagery was useful to sports-shoe companies – but at the same time they couldn't be seen to be placing too much emphasis on it. Tom Vanderbilt writes, 'As companies targeted the urban market, they were also reaching out to certain segments of the suburban market that, in a twist on the aspirational brand theory, often emulated the tough, urban culture beamed by satellite to the most pastoral settings. For the shoe companies it was a tightrope... The shoes had to be "black", but not "too black".'

Sports companies sent 'cool hunters' into the grimmest districts of American cities to find out how their latest shoe designs were being received. Other executives were encouraged to distribute free shoes to influential youth groups. But the urban audience and their heroes had already made up their own minds. Free of white establishment

associations but imbued with status, kicks were an established hip-hop accessory, a trend underlined in 1986 by the Run-DMC song 'My Adidas'. The band was later repaid for its unofficial promotional work by being invited to sign a sponsorship deal with Adidas. In 1989, a pair of white Air Jordans played a key role in Spike Lee's slice of urban cinematic poetry, *Do the Right Thing*.

By the end of the decade, the association of sports shoes with street culture was getting out of hand, with media reports of urban teenagers being slain for their expensive branded shoes. Along with claims that, in Asia, children were being paid peanuts to make sportswear, the stories contributed to a brief downturn in the sector's fortunes.

Today, though, trainers are back on top – and the urban market remains crucially important. Generally, sports-shoe brands have found that the most effective approach is to target icons, and then let the influence trickle down. Adidas, for instance, has established relationships with personalities as varied as David Beckham, Missy Elliot and The Beastie Boys. But the brand is equally skilled at more oblique approaches. It has a 'global entertainment and trend marketing department' that is responsible for non-traditional branding. An article in *The Independent* explains: '[The department's] educational, permissive approach to communicating the brand and its heritage takes many forms, ranging from localized ambient campaigns, such as the step-risers outside the South Bank that immortalized the Olympic medallists around the Sydney Games of 2000, to shop window displays at Savile Row's Oki-Noki on the evolution of the Predator football boot. The aim. . . is to assist discovery of details about the brand, rather than to directly coerce consumers into parting with their cash.' ('Stars in stripes', 13 December 2004.)

In the same article Gary Aspden, the brand's global head of entertainment promotions, says that the idea is to 'look at ways to communicate the brand to a more fashion-minded, design-oriented consumer'. The piece also points out that, as a result of his pioneering work in the field, Aspden is considered one of the 100 most influential people in fashion.

And fashion, in theory much disliked by the sports brands, has been the saving grace of Adidas's traditional arch-enemy, Puma. Although the brand's sales, at €1.3 billion, are a fraction of those of its competitors, Puma (this week, at least) has an enviably cool image. 'One of our greatest successes was to take sports shoes and apparel out

of the gym and get them, at the same time, on to the streets,' the brand's CEO, Jochen Zeitz, told French magazine *Le Point* ('*Puma: le fauve en forme*', 2 September 2004). He added, 'Today, the sports shoe. . . is an indispensable fashion accessory.'

Puma even has a chimerical name for its strategy: 'Sportlifestyle'. When Zeitz took command of the company, at the age of 30, back in 1993, the brand had changed its leadership four times in two years. After he had radically overhauled the enterprise – closing several factories and slashing staff numbers by as much as 36 per cent – the operation went into profit, the very next year, for the first time since 1986. Over the last decade, Puma has managed to differentiate itself from its competitors by charging higher prices, creating regular limited editions (only 888 pairs of its collectible Shudoh Tang shoe were ever made), and pulling models off shelves before they become too widespread. It has also rolled out a global chain of concept stores. Its decision to sponsor the Jamaican Olympic team – a group which managed to be cool, idiosyncratic and talented at the same time – for the 2004 Athens games was typically smart. Similar thinking lies behind its decision to develop strong links with the world of motor sport, a sector that had remained under-exploited by sports-shoe brands.

But more than anything, Puma has unhesitatingly pushed the fashion button. For both its clothing and footwear, it has collaborated with designers such as Jil Sander, Neil Barrett – formerly of Gucci and Prada – and Philippe Starck. It launched a line of yoga wear, Nuala, in association with the supermodel Christy Turlington. In addition, Puma's range of urban wear, 96 Hours, designed by Barrett, aims to combine sporty ruggedness with pan-European chic. (The sub-brand takes its name from the duration of the average business trip.) In 2003, a series of non-product print ads, called the 'Hello' campaign, was shot by fashion photographer Juergen Teller. The light-hearted, apparently candid images were calculated to provide an impression of quirky accessibility – marketing that pretended it was not marketing.

Puma, the David of sports-shoe brands, has challenged its Goliath-like competitors by adopting some of the characteristics of a designer label: elitism, iconoclasm and artistry. Jochen Zeitz says, 'Our clients are individualists who like to distinguish themselves from the mass.' This is one sports-shoe company that would certainly not wish to be compared to McDonald's.

Virtually dressed

‘It’s a fashion magazine where you can click to buy the things you like. What could be more fun than that?’

It does not seem so very long since the heady days of the dotcom boom, when swathes of young internet entrepreneurs were transformed overnight into the new yuppies, drunk on venture capital and conspicuous consumption. Drunk on vodka and Red Bull, too, at the parties I used to attend in London while covering the scene for a media magazine. It was the first time I’d met company directors who were younger than me – and more decadent. One article described the sector as driven by ‘three Cs: caviar, champagne and Concorde’. Then it suggested throwing cocaine into the mix, too.

Like all great times, it couldn’t last forever. I’m probably not the only one for whom the collapse of Boo.com was the definitive sign that the party was over. Although I’d only observed it from a distance, Boo seemed to be the ultimate dotcom. It was run by a bunch of good-looking young people who appeared on the covers of magazines, it sold urban fashion, and it had millions of dollars’ worth of backing.

There wasn’t quite enough backing, though. Boo collapsed through lack of funds just six months after it had launched. According to reports at the time, ‘Boo fell apart after investors failed to stump up an additional US\$30 million’ (‘Top web retailer collapses’, BBC.co.uk,

18 May 2000). This was pretty shocking, given that the company had already managed to burn through some US\$120 million from investors such as Bernard Arnault of LVMH, Benetton, and the investment banks J P Morgan and Goldman Sachs.

Boo's failings were many, but they can be summed up as 'over-ambition'. With offices in London, Stockholm, Paris and Munich, it aimed to be a global brand from day one. It spent a fortune marketing Miss Boo, the online character who would help customers navigate the site and choose their clothing. The distribution and tax issues that came with trying to dispatch items across the globe tied the company's management in knots for months. Even more crucially, although the site itself looked great, it was too advanced for the technology that most of its target customers were using. The company wasn't doing nearly enough trade to cover the cash it was spending. In addition, like many start-ups of the era, Boo had become 'as famous for its sybaritic lifestyle as for its. . . attempts to sell urban sportswear over the web' ('From Boo to bust and back again', *The Observer*, 26 August 2001).

According to the same article, Boo's liquidators sold its technology for about £170,000, and its brand name for roughly the same sum. Its founders, Ernst Malmsten and Kajsa Leander, became consultants and regular public speakers, having recovered from their virtual rollercoaster ride.

THE SUCCESS STORY

Malmsten and Leander were, quite simply, ahead of their time. Fashion addicts now regularly buy clothing over the web – via eBay. Various sources suggest that the auction site now makes around US\$2 billion a year from clothing and accessories alone. Certainly, it is considered an essential hunting ground for rare and collectible items. It even has its own online fashion magazine, *Personal Style*.

But there is at least one fashion-specific e-commerce service that deserves our attention. It's called Net-A-Porter, and despite its virtual status the British Fashion Council recently voted it the best shop in the country, selecting it from a list of possibilities that included Asprey and Matthew Williamson. Surprisingly, it was launched around the same time as Boo.com.

Net-A-Porter's founder is Natalie Massenet, an American fashion journalist. She was West Coast editor of *Women's Wear Daily* before moving to London in 1986, when she joined *Tatler*. She recalls that, foreshadowing later events, 'when I wrote an article telling people to buy something, I always wondered how many of them actually went out and bought it'. Now she knows, because her website, deliberately designed to look like an online fashion magazine, has an estimated 300,000 customers, with an extra 1,500 coming on board every month.

Massenet says the spark of inspiration that led to Net-A-Porter came when she left *Tatler* in 1998 to go freelance: 'I went online for the first time, to research a piece, and it was a revelation – I was instantly hooked. Being a girl, I wondered whether there was anything I could buy. I was surprised to discover that it wasn't really possible. There were a few American brands online, but they weren't shipping outside the States. And the design of the sites wasn't so great.' At that point, says Massenet, 'the online community was largely male. Now fashion is one of the largest categories in online retail, and there are more women than men online.'

With the seed of an idea growing in her head, Massenet had lunch with several key people in the fashion business to sound them out about the potential of an upmarket internet retail site. 'Plenty of those I spoke to told me I was absolutely crazy, but because I like to prove a point, I thought, "Right, I'm going to do it anyway." I picked up a brochure called "Are You an Entrepreneur?" from Barclays Bank and ticked all the boxes.'

Choosing a name proved surprisingly difficult. '[The site] was originally going to be called "What's New Pussycat?". But my lawyers naturally advised against it. I went to the *Women's Wear Daily* site and in the dictionary of fashion terms I found prêt-à-porter. A light went off, but for days I thought it was too good to be true. I kept turning the idea around in my mind. And then I woke up one morning thinking, "What am I doing? Of course it's got to be Net-A-Porter!"'

Once the brand name was in place, the look of the site came into focus. 'It was such a great, classy brand name that I felt we had something to live up to. The site should deserve the brand. So it would be upmarket, global, black rather than pink, simple but elegant. I was convinced it would work, because we were just beginning to see the globalization of

fashion: women in New York and Hong Kong wanted the same jeans from Chloé and the same bag from Dior.’

Around the same period – by now we’re in 1999 – Massenet picked up a copy of the *Financial Times* and read about the launch of something called Boo.com. Her heart sank, just for a moment. And then she thought, ‘Well, you know, there’s more than one store in a city.’

The site was launched in June 2000 by five women with no experience in retailing – although they did know about finance, technology and fashion. The initial investment was £190,000 from a selection of family and friends. At launch, the site offered 35 of the hottest fashion brands.

‘As we were all women, we based the service on what we’d want it to be. We were our target customers. That’s why we designed the site to look like a fashion magazine. We didn’t see why we had to make it more complicated than that, when it was a format that our customers loved. Even today, we’ve stuck to editorial iconography. It’s a fashion magazine where you can click to buy the things you like. What could be more fun than that?’

One criticism of fashion on the web is that it robs designer brands of one of their key selling points – the brand experience. When you’re not buying your expensive shirt in a sleek retail hub attended by gorgeous staff, is it worth the same amount?

Massenet says, ‘We took care of that by providing our own brand experience, which is the service. In a way it’s quite revolutionary, because the internet tends to be associated with discounting and no-frills. But this is a luxury service, offering not last season’s fashions, but next season’s fashions. And you should see the gorgeous packaging it arrives in. Today, the one true luxury is time. And we save you time by enabling you to shop 24 hours a day.’

When the site was being conceived, Massenet and her colleagues would sit around for long evenings, discussing the details of the offering. ‘We’d be shrieking and saying, “Wouldn’t you just *die* if...”, or, “Wouldn’t that just make you *cry*...” Basically, there was a lot of shrieking and dying and crying. We launched the business in a frenzy of happiness, and I think a lot of that communicated itself to the consumer.’

These days, the original core of five staff has expanded to over 100. The site ships products to more than 50 countries – on the same day in

London, within 72 hours to Europe, the United States and further afield. Taxes and duties are calculated in advance by a proprietary system, so the customer only pays the price indicated on the site.

Interestingly, Massenet says the site sells more clothes than accessories. But what about the size issue – surely that presents problems? Massenet says, ‘If something doesn’t fit, Net-A-Porter will come and pick it up from you, at our expense. Of course we realize people want to try things on. The difference here is that you get to try it on at home.’

The fact that Net-A-Porter is thriving long after the collapse of Boo.com, the interloper that gave Massenet such a fright back in 1999, justifies her simple, understated approach to the web. ‘I think Boo would still be here today if they’d had a smaller team and less money at the beginning. They were under a lot of pressure to go public in six months, and there was a lot of hype. We’ve only started getting media attention in the last 18 months.’

With the Boo case study now losing its relevance in the face of success stories such as Net-A-Porter, traditional fashion retailers may soon have to face up to competition from the web. ‘They’re building huge flagship stores in cities all over the world, a strategy that costs them billions of dollars,’ says Massenet. ‘We’re saying you only need one store, and you can get people from all over the world to come to you – a much more efficient way of doing it. Think about it: what would an alien think if you explained the concept of a fashion store to him? “You have to get dressed, drive somewhere in your car, get undressed in front of a bunch of strangers, try something on, then get undressed again. . . .” Our way is much less stressful.’

INTERACTIVE CATALOGUES

And Net-A-Porter is by no means alone. Other fashion retail sites are springing up across the web, from eluxury, Yoox and Chic-N-Unique, right through to Walmart.com, which has reintroduced its apparel category after abandoning it a couple of years ago. Amazon.com launched an apparel and accessories section in November 2002. Forrester Research estimates that the online retail market will be worth US\$316 billion by 2010.

Nicole Heidemann, the e-commerce director of web-based fashion and trends service WGSN, says there are simple reasons for this

expansion: 'The most obvious one is that people are much more at ease with the web than they were in the era of Boo.com. And of course there has been the arrival of broadband, which means you don't have to wait ages for a picture to download, as you did not so long ago. This in turn has led retailers to design more imaginative and attractive sites. A lot of people who might have been catalogue shoppers before are now turning to the internet.'

This theory is confirmed by Eva Jeanbart-Lorenzotti, who started her own luxury retail site, Vivre.com, as a spin-off from her existing catalogue business. 'I wanted to create another way for people to have access,' she told the *International Herald Tribune*, adding that internet sales would soon outpace the catalogue. ('Online luxury comes of age', 10 August 2004.)

Luxury brands, surprisingly, are in a good position to take advantage of the web, says Heidemann. 'A large percentage of their customers are in high-powered jobs which mean they don't have time to go shopping. Convenience is a major selling point for the web. These sites also provide advice, and edit the vast range of fashion choices down to the most essential items.'

Unlike the vast majority of glossy magazines, the sites may also provide a valuable means of expression for up-and-coming designers. 'Yoox, which is based in Milan, makes a point of promoting young designers it thinks are interesting. As most sites combine retail with journalism, they can offer the best of a store and a fashion magazine in one interactive package,' explains Heidemann.

Net-A-Porter's Natalie Massenet believes her former employers, the glossies, will have to compete more effectively with their online rivals: 'Fashion trends are speeding up. The internet is the only medium that can keep pace, while the glossies still have three- to four-month lead times. Over time, their only choice will be to evolve into big, beautiful coffee-table books.'

Certainly, the most innovative things in fashion media are happening on the web. Apart from neoteric online magazines such as Hint and Into the Storm – cannily published by the Storm modelling agency – there is photographer Nick Knight's genre-bending SHOWstudio. The site was launched in November 2000 as an online space enabling creatives to present interactive and mixed-media work. As the site itself explains, it has developed into 'a high-profile fashion broadcasting initiative with over 200 contributors including Kate Moss, Hussein Chalayan,

Alexander McQueen, Björk, Julie Verhoeven and Yohji Yamamoto'. Get any hipper than that and you implode. For the mere spectator, SHOWstudio is an electronic tapestry of fashion news, cutting-edge design, experimental film, and interviews with leading industry names. The latter are increasingly broadcast live – and free of charge, to boot. In addition, the site has its own studio space where staffers and invitees stage live fashion-related events, from straightforward runway shows to surreal performance art. It's probably no exaggeration to suggest that SHOWstudio is the fashion medium of the future. (*Tank* magazine is also part of this evolution, having launched Tank TV, a subscription film site.)

But while journalists, photographers and free-wheeling designers seem determined to push ahead, there is evidence to suggest that the mainstream fashion brands are lagging behind. Few of them offer a comprehensive online shopping service – as Massenot discovered way back in 1998, they can't deliver across borders – and many of them don't even seem to know how to tackle the medium. Trapped between the dual necessity of appealing to customers and providing corporate information for reporters, investors and job-hunters, they end up fulfilling neither function effectively. The typical result is a jumble of Flash animation and ugly downloadable PDF files.

A survey by New York branding consultancy Brand Keys (www.brandkeys.com) in late 2004 highlighted the issue. It stated that, while most fashion brands understood the power of a pretty picture to sell their product, they got stuck when they were obliged to make that picture interactive. According to the survey, many top fashion retailers failed to communicate their image effectively over the web – and even risked generating negative attitudes among consumers. The consultancy hinted that fashion brands took a rather snobbish attitude towards the internet, regarding it as a 'below-the-line' medium, akin to junk mail, or merely a tedious necessity. Which is a shame, because the internet is actually a 'high consonance' brand-enhancing vehicle – meaning that it has a high impact among upmarket consumers, like cinema and niche cable and satellite TV channels.

The Brand Keys survey questioned 1,500 women about 15 fashion brand websites. Brands whose sites were rated positively included Armani, DKNY, Nike, Gap and Ralph Lauren. Those that were thought to undermine the brand included Versace, Dior, Levi's and Wrangler.

The results were almost duplicated in a study released the same year by Ledbury Research, a British organization specializing in the luxury market. Having analysed the sites of 25 luxury brands, Ledbury found them, almost without exception, 'slow and difficult to navigate'. Gucci, which offered an internet shopper, and Louis Vuitton, which provided advice via an instant messaging service, were highlighted as exceptions. Ledbury pointed out that the luxury brands were missing a trick, as affluent consumers were 'three times more likely to spend more than £250 on a single purchase than mainstream consumers, and more likely to recommend good sites to friends'. ('Luxury brands need online strategy', WGSN News Service, 11 June 2004.)

Since that time, however, there have been signs of improvement. Despite their almost paranoid need to retain control over every aspect of their brands, some designers have begun outsourcing their web operations. Armani, for example, appointed Yoox to create its online boutique. The process was not a smooth one, however, as Giorgio Armani himself oversaw the project and wanted to ensure that the site captured the luxurious experience of shopping at the brand's flagship store in Milan. 'Mr Armani wasn't satisfied with the results and sent back the early drafts with changes. He wanted the site to look three-dimensional, and he wanted a spotlight to shine on each product as it moved across the screen, a technique used in his stores to impart elegance. Yoox had never used such a visual effect, and it had to invent a new software code.' ('Fashion's Trend: Outsource the web', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 2007.) Armani was also displeased with the product images that Yoox planned to use, and demanded reshoots. But he has a sound reason for being so demanding: the internet boutique is expected to become one of his brand's biggest stores within a few years.

In 2007, Louis Vuitton appointed the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather to inject some modernity into its advertising – and more importantly, into its internet strategy. The brand wanted to recapture its travel heritage, which had become obscured by the images of models and actresses with handbags that have characterized the Marc Jacobs era. The initial result of Ogilvy's appointment was a trio of print ads featuring very different personalities – Mikhail Gorbachev, Catherine Deneuve and the golden couple Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf – on their 'personal voyages'. Seeing Gorbachev cuddled up to a Vuitton bag was a little surprising, but other than that the ads seemed perfectly banal

– even a touch retrograde, although they were immaculately shot by Annie Leibovitz.

The online element was far more unusual. A series of microsites could be accessed from the main Louis Vuitton homepage. Through a beguiling blend of photography, narration and music, each personality featured in the advertising campaign shared their personal vision of a favourite city, transporting the user on a magical voyage with them. The fact that the microsites used photography rather than the expected video in this new medium added to their elegance and allowed them to stand out from the crowd. Thanks to Ogilvy, Vuitton had finally found a way of transferring its high-end brand values onto the web.

Other luxury brands are now working hard to decode the web, and it seems unlikely that it will remain a mystery to them for much longer.

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Rise of the bloggers

'I'm hacking fashion, I suppose.'

Every April, in the verdant grounds of an angular art deco villa not far from Saint Tropez, the French fashion pack gathers to determine the future of the industry. The focus of the event is a series of catwalk shows – held in a tent down on the beach – featuring the work of young designers from fashion schools around the world. In between shows, the hopefuls install themselves in makeshift ateliers and share their vision with buyers, reporters and, most importantly, a judging panel that will later award the festival Grand Prix. Alongside the fashion competition is a parallel category for photographers. The event also embraces seminars, networking – and some pretty fabulous parties.

The Hyères International Festival of Fashion and Photography used to be a rarefied, exclusive event, attended only by the happy few who worked in the industry, wrote for the right magazines, or knew the right people. In recent years, though, a new tribe has been spotted stalking across the villa's immaculately barbered lawns, staking out the best places at the shows and helping themselves to finger food and champagne. They are the fashion bloggers, and they are assailing the elitist world of glossy magazines.

One of them is British blogger Susanna Lau, whose blog Style Bubble attracts more than 10,000 visitors a day. A minor celebrity among UK fashion fans, Lau occasionally gets spotted when she's out

shopping. This popularity with everyday consumers is what makes blogs increasingly attractive to brands – and subsequently gains bloggers access to fashion events.

Not that it was Lau's goal when she started out. She's always considered fashion a hobby, and although she did 'a bit of styling for student magazines' at university, she actually studied history. At the time of writing, she works for a digital advertising agency in London. Increasingly, however, she finds herself being approached by fashion brands for styling and consultancy advice. Not bad for somebody who only started blogging in March 2006.

'I was partly inspired by leading fashion blogs like Fashionologie and A Shaded View on Fashion [by Paris-based commentator Diane Pernet],' she explains. 'And I was always chatting with other fashion fanatics on forums like Fashion Spot. I wanted to express myself, and I thought a blog would be a much easier platform than a website. My idea was to get back to the basics of blogging, which is to express a personal viewpoint. Some blogs have begun to approach fashion in a rather cold way, with newsy posts about dresses you can't afford. But I want to raise issues and provoke debate.'

Their provocative, often irreverent, approach to fashion is exactly what made blogs seem daunting to big brands, which were used to the criticism-free environment of the glossies. But readers quickly realized that blogs were an alternative, refreshing source of news and opinion. And smaller designers saw a promotional opportunity: after all, you can't dismiss 10,000 visitors a day.

'As we all know, glossy magazines devote an extremely limited amount of space to designers that don't have an advertising budget,' says Lau. 'On the other hand, I'll enthusiastically support and promote a designer whose work I find interesting.'

In addition, hyperactive bloggers are arguably more in sync with the changeable spirit of fashion than the traditional glossies. Fashion magazines are planned up to three months in advance – a blogger can report on a show ten minutes after the designer has left the runway.

BLOGS AND THE PRESS

The organizers of catwalk shows in London, New York, Paris and Milan all report an increasing presence of bloggers. But their gradual

acceptance by the fashion community has also eaten into the bloggers' independent status. Well-known fashion bloggers are now sent gifts, invited to launch parties and taken on press junkets just like glossy magazine journalists.

Some have crossed to the other side on a more professional basis. Lau dabbles in fashion journalism and admits she may eventually take it up full time. Another popular blogger, The Sartorialist – Scott Schuman, who wowed the fashion crowd with his razor-sharp street photography and pithy commentaries – was given his own column in the US edition of *GQ*, after stints taking photographs for the Condé Nast website Style.com.

'I could see from the statistics on the site that they were watching me for a while,' says Schuman, who started his photo-blog in September 2005. 'I think what they noticed was consistency: I wasn't shooting someone with good taste one day and bad taste the next. They also noticed an eye for detail.'

Schuman had an advantage in that he'd already worked in the fashion business for 15 years, including running a showroom for designers. The blog sprang out of his observation that a certain kind of well-dressed male was not represented in men's fashion magazines. 'I'd be out on the streets of New York and I'd see these ordinary guys who nonetheless had a very distinct sense of style. Some of them were quirky; others were wearing beautiful Italian suits. I thought other guys would be inspired by them, but you never saw pictures of them anywhere.'

He initially toyed with the idea of setting up a website, but it seemed overly complicated, as well as requiring a whole team of people. 'It was only when I found out about blogging that the whole thing clicked. This was a platform that was easy to set up, virtually free, and enabled me to express my ideas.'

Less than a year after his blog had gone online, Scott got a call from Style.com, which dispatched him to Milan to take pictures of the guys attending, or merely hanging around, the men's fashion shows. That's when the media really began to notice him, he says. 'I was dressed stylishly, so I didn't look like just another photographer. I didn't blend in. I looked more like a fashion editor with a camera. Before long, people asked me what I was up to, and we got talking. Then one time I was at a Prada show and [*GQ* editor] Jim Nelson called me over.'

As the site evolved, The Sartorialist began to take photos of women as well as men. This broad appeal – combined with media coverage

– drove his site’s figures up to 45,000 visitors a day. With Condé Nast handling his ad sales, he began to reap genuine income from the blog. He also signed a book deal with Phaidon, and the James Danziger gallery in New York staged an exhibition of his work. Schuman admits that his rapid ascent has left him slightly breathless. ‘I could never have imagined that things would move this fast. To use an English expression, I’m chuffed.’

But he doesn’t believe that blogs will one day take over from magazines as the fashionista’s medium of choice. ‘It’s a totally different thing. My photos are a slice of life, while a magazine makes you daydream in another way. But I do think blogs are a great source of talent for the mainstream media. And at the same time, the people who run blogs have a certain amount of power. A blogger who is recruited by a newspaper can maybe negotiate a better contract because they have an audience of thousands of people that they’re bringing with them.’

Inevitably, the bloggers who have been adopted by the mainstream fashion press did not ape it, or fantasize about being part of it, but set out to express their own unique visions. Fashion has a vampire-like lust for novelty.

This new collusion between the outlaw world of the blogs and the fashion establishment is generally perceived as a good thing – injecting a much needed dose of fresh air into the industry media. In New York, it helps harassed PRs ensure that fashion shows will be packed out, despite an over-supply of shows and an over-stretched press corps. But it can also create some abrasive moments. In early 2007, media news website Mediabistro reported on a fashion show encounter between blogger Julie Fredrickson – of the site Coutorture – and *Vogue* supremo Anna Wintour. Spotting Wintour ‘minding her own front-row business’, Fredrickson gamely began to interview the powerful editor. Much to her credit, Wintour politely began to answer the questions – until her publicist appeared and sent the blogger packing. (‘Bloggers in tents: fashion warms to new media’, 6 February 2007.)

For readers – and, of course, for the bloggers themselves – this new media is another stage in the democratization of the fashion industry, enabling them to pierce the façade of this notoriously elitist business. Even the backstage of catwalk shows is no longer out of bounds to the general public, thanks to blogs like the one begun by Anina, a model. Using her mobile phone, she started snapping backstage scenes, parties

and images from her travels and posting them on her blog with breezy commentaries. She's since gone on to create 360 Fashion, a network of blogs from around the fashion industry.

'I blog using my mobile about a hundred times a day because, in my work, I'm absolutely not anywhere near a computer,' she told *Wired* magazine. 'Fashion is a mystery to many people. Now, like voyeurs, they can see what's happening in the industry.' Hardly conforming to the clichéd image of the fashion model, Anina learned how to write computer code at school. 'I like to see how systems work. . . I'm hacking fashion, I suppose.' ('Le chic shall inherit les blogs', 6 December 2005.)

Understandably, the rise of blogs has inspired many mainstream media to start their own versions. Among the most respected establishment bloggers is Cathy Horyn of *The New York Times*. Horyn noted the rising power of blogs back in 2005, when she wrote: 'Although fashion, like politics, is still an insider's game, with its own addicts and agenda-setting editors, nothing, it seems, can compete with the authentic judgement of bloggers and web viewers.' ('The Paris 6', 28 April 2005.)

Forget 'authentic': a positive judgement is what brands are hoping for when they dispatch a freebie to a blogger – or summon them to an exclusive launch event. Some bloggers are easily seduced. Others, though, are determined to remain outspoken and untarnished. 'I still think my first duty is to my readers,' says Susanna Lau of Style Bubble. 'I was recently invited on a trip to Paris by Chanel, to cover the launch of their latest advertising campaign, but in my posts I was absolutely transparent about what the deal was. I certainly won't accept money from brands for posts, which I know some bloggers do. And although I receive at least 30 e-mails a day asking me to promote some product or another, that's not what I'm here for.'

Apart from a single banner – for Net-a-Porter – she does not yet accept advertising. 'I know I should monetize the site, but as a digital media planner I'm not convinced that a blog is the right place for brands. British readers tend to find advertising invasive and the click-through rate is very low.'

Not all bloggers – or advertisers – share her view. While it's difficult to unearth any concrete figures, anecdotal evidence suggests that a handful of bloggers are making a great deal of money out of advertising. The creator of Manolo's Shoe Blog – who is no relation to designer Manolo

Blahnik – is apparently a ‘six-figure blogger’; while an irreverent site called Go Fug Yourself – which lashes dodgy celebrity dress sense – has enabled its creators to give up their day jobs. (‘Flashy and tailor-made: rag trade blogs’, *International Herald Tribune*, 17 September 2007.)

The market is becoming overcrowded, however, and it’s now almost impossible to quantify the number of fashion blogs on the web. In April 2007, the website Fashion IQ compiled a list of the top 50 fashion blogs in the United States, based on unique visitors (audience), traffic (page views) and the number of other blogs that linked to the site (influence). The top five were Go Fug Yourself, Young Black and Fabulous, Purse Blogs, Fashion Tribes and Shoewawa. But the list was inevitably controversial, and it’s certain that the hierarchy of fashion blogs has changed many times since then.

Some bloggers have professionalized by becoming part of branded networks run by web media companies. The results resemble online magazines. Yet they don’t create, they merely curate. Typical of these is Glam Media, whose network of women-oriented sites is led by Glam.com, an aggregation of fashion, beauty and lifestyle blogs. Officially launched during New York Fashion Week in September 2006, just over a year later its staff had swelled from 25 to 100 and it had become the most popular women-oriented site in the United States, according to ComScore Media Metrix.

Glam’s vice-president of product marketing Bernard Desarnauts says: ‘Today there’s no question that the internet has become an additional form of entertainment. And within this new medium you have a new and authentic voice – the voice of bloggers. It’s the voice of the people, if you like. Consumers have no problem differentiating between an “official” medium like a newspaper and an independent voice that’s not moderated or edited.’

Glam.com founder Samir Arora noted that many bloggers were evolving into independent publishers: their blogs had become full-time occupations. And yet they were unable to make a decent living out of their work. Glam allows them to do this by placing their blogs on its network and splitting advertising revenue 50/50, based on page impressions. It also works with the bloggers to create microsites and promotional content for brands. All this has changed the lives of many of the site’s 400-plus ‘indie publishers’, as Desarnauts calls them. ‘We’ve got people who were only making two or three hundred dollars

a month out of advertising on their sites before – and are now making as much as five thousand dollars.’

In addition, Desarnauts says that Glam is going after big advertisers: ‘those who really want to use the internet to build brands, rather than seeing it as a way of getting people to click through to a transactional site’. Based in San Francisco, with a sales and editorial office in New York, Glam is rapidly expanding worldwide.

Its rival is FabSugar, run by San Francisco-based Sugar Inc. In 2006 the company raised investment of US\$5 million from investment fund Sequoia. It also has backing from establishment media company NBC. This has enabled it to expand its blogging empire – it bought Coutorture, a network of more than 200 blogs, for an undisclosed fee in October 2007. (‘Sugar Publishing buys fashion blog network Coutorture’, *Paidcontent.org*, 8 October 2007.)

More and more bloggers, it seems, are tempted to sell out to this new generation of media companies.

But not Susie Lau, who says, ‘It’s not my ambition to be bought out. I want to retain control of my blog. I’m more likely to develop it by adding video material. I can use the fact that it’s now fairly well known to gain access to exclusive events and report on them. And then I can imagine having a sort of parallel career in mainstream fashion journalism.’

One question that springs to mind when looking at Lau’s blog is: how does she find the time? After all, she’s posting every day – often more than once – and holding down a full-time job. ‘Basically, I don’t need much sleep,’ she reveals. ‘I come from Hong Kong and I think that’s part of my heritage. We’re always awake. I can get by on about three hours a day.’

Aspiring bloggers, take note.

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