

Chapter 3

You are what you wear: the ideal and real consumer/user

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That consumption is key to understanding the ways in which consumers identify and express themselves is now taken for granted in the field of marketing. This is especially the case in fashion design, which in turn, has created its own systems of marketing personal expression such that designers cater for particular types of consumer. For example, there is 'the Marc Jacobs woman' and 'the woman who is very Vuitton'.

In the realm of digital design, knowing your consumer (or user) this intimately is recommended through user research and the development of user personas. In this sense, 'The Marc Jacobs woman' and 'the woman who is very Vuitton' could be described as user personas. However, there are differences: personas are intended to represent the real, to depict users as they are. Fashion articulates an ideal user, and it is this fantasy to which the consumer aspires. While this has been criticised as setting impossible standards, it is a craft which is relevant to digital experience design in that it poses an additional question to that of 'who are we designing for?' but also 'who is the client seeking to attract?'. As Shedroff maintains, seduction is a critical element of experience design. The desire for haute couture in terms of the quality and wealth it connotes can have a digital equivalent through the creation of an image or lifestyle which entices prospective users. Desire for designer fashion is translated into demand for ready-to-wear: that is, despite that haute couture is unaffordable for most, the promise it makes in relation how it makes the consumer feel becomes transformed into the purchase of associated but attainable items in the collection.

As Roland Barthes argues in his book, *The Fashion System*, the ownership and display of items are seen as indicators of particular personal characteristics. This can be extended from clothing and accessories to encompass the choices that are made about online representation such as avatars in chat rooms, or blogging environments. Like fashion, these are not just indicative of what the user wants to convey about themselves, but who they wish to affiliate with and seek as their

audience. Fashion blogs are examined as places where the ideal identities depicted by the fashion industry are contested by the ideal selves forged online by fashion consumers. Sara Goldstein, also known as the Bargain Queen blogger, provides an insight into the interplay between the real and ideal users in fashion blogging, and differentiates this from the fantasy role-playing seen in games and virtual worlds.

Ideal vs real identity

This chapter looks at the Web as a kind of wearable technology. Like fashion accessories, the sites one visits are intended as a signifier of one's values, attitudes, beliefs and lifestyle. You are what you surf. The company you keep online says as much about you as the kind of people with whom you associate offline, although this may articulate different aspects of your identity. Just as the clothes you wear to work differ from those worn to at home, the Web sites you visit at work are not likely to be the same as those used in a domestic setting.

While much has been written about the online identities that users create for themselves (see Turkle), this largely refers to digital environments such as games, chatrooms or virtual worlds that are premised upon users choosing ideal and fantastic identities. By contrast, the dot.com industry still seems preoccupied by 'real' users when designing for the Web. Techniques such as contextual enquiry are aimed at studying users in their real-world (mostly work) environments and understanding Web use as part of the practice of everyday life. These are preoccupied with the Web as a practical item. In this sense, Web designers look at the Web as a form of clothing, rather than as a form of fashion. Indeed, when was the last time you thought an organizational intranet was sexy and appealing?

If practical considerations were the main determining factor in buying clothes, a very small number of options would suffice. The fashion industry depends upon choice rather than necessity. As a result, most people in the Western world have bursting wardrobes, filled with clothing purchased for reasons other than bodily protection: each generation of teenagers gravitates towards styles their parents do not wear; and many people buy the accoutrements of a new pastime with more gusto than they subsequently devote to their hobby, leading to wardrobes full of sparkling clean hiking boots and tennis shoes that are worn mostly to the mall.

This chapter is not about advocating conspicuous consumption, but rather about understanding the desires that drive as a way of designing digital experiences that are more attractive to users.

‘Fashion is balancing the interplay between the need for a person to shelter him or herself from the elements and the need for the person to look beautiful’ (Charney cited in Berenson 2005: 68)

The tension between clothing and fashion, or the real and ideal, is skewed in Web design. In contrast to computer games design, the dominance of pragmatism in Web development means that it is yet to explore the role of fantasy in online identities and its role in attracting users to a particular site or product. In contrast, fashion industry practices operate upon the invisible, elusive and ephemeral (Agin 1999: 7), rather than the visible, tangible or mundane aspects of clothing (Kawamura 2004: 4). They are not concerned with actual users, or their dress sizes. If they were, then most clothing items would be made at the ‘average’ of size 14, the most commonly purchased dress size. Rather, fashion begins with the creation of an ideal user as a standard to which the real user aspires to fit:

‘The logic of the fashion image on the page is not primarily to stimulate immediate consumption—the reader need not feel any obligation to buy, this is not a selling strategy. For example, in one issue of the *Guardian* (4 April 1997) the clothes by the designer Alberta Ferretti shown on the three page spread included a chiffon dress at £1,010, a kimono coat at £1,467 and a chiffon skirt at £601. Ferretti’s clothes are extraordinarily expensive and so the point of running such a feature is to say something to the readers about Ferretti as somebody they ought to know about, and to show the work so that it evokes a certain mood or fantasy about beauty, wealth and “lifestyle”, as well as about female sexuality.’ (McRobbie 1998: 162-163)

This logic is used to sell much more than fashion, but this is less understood and applied on the Web despite the rise of e-commerce. Thus, how might ‘the logic of fashion’ be applied in Web development? How might online design practices be reconfigured to encompass the ideal user? How might the ideal user be a departure

point for creating alluring online experiences?

There are two inter-related elements of fashion industry practices that are key to the seduction of consumers: branding and fantasy. The former is the instrument for the creation of the latter. As McRobbie notes in the example above, branding goes beyond the visual to represent a fantastic image or experience of a product.

‘Great branding is about striking... aspirational chords. This is particularly true in the fashion world which deals with issues of self-expression and self-esteem. Do I look good? Does this reflect who I am? How do I want to project myself into the world?’ (Catherine Sadler, fashion marketing executive for Coach, Ann Taylor Loft and Terence Conran; cited in Berenson 2005: 26)

The fantasy being promised through branding is crucial to the process of purchasing and consumption. The consumer is buying not only the item, but the symbolic value associated with the item. They knowingly partake in an act of pretence to acquire that which they want but do not have.

As mentioned previously, certain types of digital experiences already does this well. Strong branding in the games industry (Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo) promises the user a superior gaming experience and the fantasy of being a better player. The ideal user is one who appreciates the technical sophistication of a particular platform and harnesses it to their advantage. The games themselves allow users to fulfil the fantasy of adopting an identity different to one’s own in real life. Men can appropriate female identities. They present opportunities to tamper with those aspects of identity in a digital context that are otherwise verifiable and quite ‘fixed’ in everyday life. These include attributes like:

- name
- gender
- ethnicity
- age
- education
- place of birth

- your family
- your occupation
- place of residence
- marital status
- socio-economic status.

While these aspects of identity generally cannot be chosen in the offline world, they can be manufactured in games and other online experiences such as chatrooms and virtual worlds. However, as Nakamura's (2002) research shows, this sort of online 'identity tourism' is primarily male-dominated.

The deployment of fantasy in fashion is somewhat different on a number of levels. Firstly, it is a heavily gendered market divided according to men, women and children's fashions. Secondly, it is more concerned with enhancement of oneself rather than escaping one's real-life identity. That is, it involves aspects of identity in which choice is exercised: hopes, dreams and aspirations. For example, as obesity rates increase in the developed world, the labeling of clothes sizes has been revised accordingly so that what used to be a size 14 is now labeled a size 12; and size 16 is now a size 14 (Gray and McGregor 2005, Gebhart 2005). The fashion industry perpetuates the fantasy of not being 'average', that is size 14. Rather, the female consumer can be the desired size 12 (or less) irrespective of weight gain or bodily changes. This practice, known as 'vanity sizing', is intended to make women feel better about themselves, to allow them to imagine themselves a little taller, thinner, richer or prettier: it is not about encouraging them to become someone else. Similarly, designers ensure that their products are accessible at different levels of the market so that women from across a wide socio-economic demographic can engage in the fantasy of affording designer fashion.

'...we can't put three sleeves on a shirt or four legs on a pant; we're all doing the same thing but at different levels.' (Daymond John, founder of FUBU clothing cited in Berenson 2005: 42)

This is where opportunities for targeting an online female market lie. Whereas the

male user is already well served by digital experiences which enable identity experimentation, the transfer of techniques from the fashion industry which apply branding and fantasy and engage a female audience on a broad scale have not been so apparent on the Web. Yet creating a product that carries the cachet of one's idealised identity, and has a purpose in real life, can lead to enormous financial success. People who harbour fantasies of becoming a rock star will, in the process of waiting and working towards that day, buy albums by musicians they admire, and wear T-shirts emblazoned with their idol's name. These accessible items allow them to express their ideal identity within the context of their real lives.

Mass exclusivity: tapping into a common desire to be 'one-off'

According to McRobbie (1998: 4), the fashion industry operates on the basic rationale that everyone is striving to be different. Fashion is premised upon the assertion of individuality. When translating this to the online realm, it becomes clear that the current practice of developing personas as a way of understanding Web use is flawed.

The creation of personas is based on an aggregate of data gathered from a group of actual users. The users are then classified into 'hypothetical archetypes' (Cooper 2003), but essentially represent 'real' users and not any particular individual (Ford 2005). While this process is similar to fashion branding in presenting a generic type of person, it is more about 'the person I am' than 'the person I want to be'. In the design of Web-based experiences, the archetypes are grounded by mundane practices; whereas those in fashion are less realistic and arguably impossible to be.

'[Ralph] Lauren would often begin [design meetings] by describing a little vignette of his idealized customer, such as a sophisticated woman with a casual, elegant style, who loved to travel to Europe.' (Agin 1999: 95)

These kinds of ideal archetypes have been deployed to great effect in related industries such as advertising which target the female consumer. The representation of mothers and motherhood in print and television advertising depicts an unrealistic ideal: beautiful women, perfectly groomed, well dressed, unhurried and unfazed by the demands of being a parent. Evidently, these personas

have not been produced by observing sleep-deprived, harassed mothers struggling to juggle work and family.

In the online realm, there may be a place for what may be termed ‘aspirational personas’ which take user goals and motivations beyond task-based objectives to an ideological or philosophical level. This would mean making the user feel like they are experiencing a one-off site, designed only for them. This goes beyond user-centredness, to a kind of egocentricity. It would suggest that the Web site serves the same function as *haute couture* in that surrounding it is the belief that it is ‘special, even sacred, (and has the) status of art works’ (Bourdieu 1993a cited in McRobbie 1998: 12). It has the air of being unattainable (as this is what drives consumer demand) but in fact, it is readily accessible (as Web sites should be). Just like the ready-to-wear collections of designers, Web sites seeking to target women through the presentation of an ideal archetype must negotiate a fine line between being exclusive and available.

This does not necessitate overhauling Web development practices. Rather, it may be as simple as providing users with ways of expressing their individuality. In fashion terms, it is akin to school students substituting non-standard items into their uniforms with adornments that would be worn by the person they would like to become to show that they are not identical to their classmates. In online terms, this is often seen in functionality that enables personalisation and customisation of software. These are merely minor variations which ‘maximise’ and ‘enhance’ the self (Agins 1999: 44, 155).

At the interface of women and the online world: fashion blogs

Fashion blogs represent an intersection of online practices with both the ideal self and offline consumer. They are places where women convene online to engage in and discuss ‘the logic of fashion’ at the level of consumption.

‘I love to write about where I bought something, how it was a bargain or just how gorgeous it is. I write it for myself more than anything because I love to shop,

especially when I find a real bargain or discover a new shop or local designer.’ *

At the same time, they are also platforms for the performance of an ideal self through one’s online identity. They are communities of practice for negotiating the fantasies generated from the ‘top down’ by the fashion industry and those produced from the ‘bottom up’ by online women with interests in fashion. Blogging gives ordinary people a chance to air their views on the ways they might present themselves to the world – as well as a chance to express their likes and dislikes in the way the mainstream media covers fashion. Fashion blogging is an emerging online phenomenon that has special relevance in discussing how identities, online and offline, are defined as fashion blogs typically cover both ideal and real aspects of both the bloggers’ and their readers’ identities.

Bloggging is loosely defined as a practise of posting information to a Web site. The postings appear in reverse-chronological order: that is, you read the writer’s latest thoughts first. All blogging is, to an extent, personality based: it is a medium in which a strong viewpoint, a different perspective and a willingness to ‘be yourself’ are essential to engage an audience. Blogs may be personal affairs, used by an individual to keep their friends informed about the goings-on in their life; or they might be topical offerings, where the blogger sticks to writing about one topic that interests them. While personal blogs are more common, topical blogs tend to be more popular, as they are relevant to an audience beyond the reader’s own friends. Fashion blogs are just one type of topical blog.

Fashion bloggers use their blogs to discuss their views on matters of fashion and style, that is the outward visual expression of a person’s identity. Fashion blogs are concerned with clothing and accessories from individual designers to large retailers. They offer various perspectives on fashion from both inside and outside the industry. In many cases, this perspective is markedly different to that of the mainstream fashion media. Most fashion blogs have a particular perspective on

* In an online survey of readers and writers of fashion blogs, it was found that almost all were women, under the age of 40, university educated and from Western countries. Half of those surveyed regularly read between 6 to 20 fashion blogs, spending more than 5 hours per week doing this. Over half of those surveyed wrote their own blog with most posting up to 3 times per week. 42% of surveyed bloggers have audiences of 500 readers or more, while one third made some form of income from their blog.

fashion and style. Some are 'aspirational': they write about expensive designer fashion that is not affordable for most people, in the same way that high fashion magazines like Vogue, Elle and Harper's Bazaar do. A high fashion blog may cover both runway shows, with prohibitively expensive clothing, and also the reasonably-priced interpretation of the runway trends. Others are about shopping for clothing most people can afford, giving women a chance to see the season's offerings without traipsing around the shops. These often resemble shopping magazines like Lucky (U.S.), Happy (U.K) or Shop 'Til You Drop (Australia). The Bargain Queen (Australia), focuses on finding your own style rather than following fashion. There are also blogs that focus on particular fashion items or niches: shoes, handbags, plus-sized or petite fashions. A shopping blog is likely to show both realistically priced items most readers can afford, but also 'aspirational' items that are admired and identified with by many readers, but affordable for very few. This gives readers a chance to become more knowledgeable about the top end choices, while simultaneously engaging in consumption relevant to their actual lives.

Fashion blogs not only exemplify the convergence of the online and offline at the level of the individual fashion blogger/follower, but also at the level of industry. They demonstrate how an online product can generate its own industry and economy on the 'coat tails' of another: 'the fashion media does indeed function as a pillar of support for the industry' (McRobbie 1998: 151). The television series *Sex and the City*, with its huge female following, offered a successful crossover between the fashion and media industries. The appeal of the four main women protagonists in the show were arguably 'ideal archetypes' despite their flaws. Female viewers affiliated with one or more the characters and aspired to the (mostly designer) clothes worn by them which were not only featured on the show but in fashion magazines. This, in turn, generated interest in the particular labels, clothing items and where these could be purchased. The increased sales in Manolo Blahnik shoes which resulted from the show can be attributed to this symbiotic relationship between the media and fashion industries.

Fashion blogs are also indicative of this industrial interdependence. However, in an online context, there is much more opportunity for consumer representation. They are important because while the clothing and apparel business is enormous and has universal impact, it has been seen as lacking truly independent voices. Fashion blogs offer women a forum to comment on the work of designers, and to speak back to designers. They are disrupting the chasm that has traditionally existed between fashion expert and victim, professional and amateur - whereby industry determined the 'ideal selves' to which women should aspire. They offer a space for the female consumer to construct her own 'ideal self' in response to those set by industry, providing a dialogue from the 'grassroots'.

'I believe it is so important to have a positive self image and to take care of yourself. Key ideas are first learn to love your face without makeup, your body without clothes and your hair without chemicals.'

This is more than just user-generated content, but rather a cacophony of 'user voices' where there was no room for these previously. The fashion blogger herself is able to reclaim what McRobbie (1998: 151) regards as the lowly status of fashion writing, by putting her own experience and form of expertise into the arena:

'I've always been interested with how people's clothing reflects who they are and how they use it to express themselves. I also enjoy writing about things I feel strongly about.'

Indeed, this privileging of the personal through the fashion blogger writing in the first person is consistent with principles of feminist autobiography. Given that feminism is concerned with improving the status of women's representation and participation (Stanley 1990: 12-15), the communities of practice which revolve around fashion blogs are applying feminist principles in challenging extant industry structures as well as the lack of women's spaces online.

How do fashion bloggers represent their ideal selves online?

As with other online spaces, contributors to fashion blogs choose a 'screen name'.

Reminiscent of the 'stage' names that performers use to re/invent themselves, this can reflect varying degrees of their real or ideal selves. While some people use a variation on their real name, others might use fashion brand names. Likewise, the choice of an image to represent their identities may range from photographs to fashion logos.

There are also a number of popular ways that pictures of participants' outfits can be posted online. These include MyStyleDiary, the Wardrobe Remix group on Flickr, MySpace photos in addition to fashion blogs. Although this brings offline identity into the online environment, there are processes of translation and editing: it is common for these photos to be headless as the user has opted to crop their face from the image.

Just as 'real' identities inform online representation, so too can online activities bolster offline activities. For those already working in the fashion industry, reading blogs and participating in online discussions improve professional knowledge. For industry 'outsiders', they are means to staying ahead of trends and inspiring the creation of a fashionable offline identity.

'I'm trying to figure out fashion as a whole and my place in it, while defining a personal style.'

Case study: The Bargain Queen

The Bargain Queen is a successful fashion and style blog. The site tagline is 'live like a Queen, spend like a pauper' (in other words, a negotiation of ideal and real), and it helps readers do this by providing lots of hints, tips and inspiration on how to save money without sacrificing style.

I started The Bargain Queen in February 2006 as a hobby, because the balance between style and budgetary constraints is a topic I've always been very interested in, and I'm generally not impressed by the standard of coverage of this topic in the mainstream media.

The popularity of the site is an indication of how many other people are interested

in this subject. After only a year, the site has grown from zero to almost 15,000 readers a month, with no marketing or promotional budget, and until I decided to turn it into a business in November, I took time off whenever I needed to attend to other things. The site is now profitable and continues to grow at a rate of 30% per month. For a site to grow this way with very limited resources shows that people are interested enough to not only keep coming back, but also to tell their friends about it.

The Bargain Queen is a classic example of the way real and ideal identity can intersect. Readers of the site live on limited budgets, as practically everyone does, but want to be stylish regardless. While mainstream publications often fall into a trap of implying that style must be bought at high prices from their advertisers, many people seek a more balanced approach.

I have discovered through trial and error that there are some things my readers love to hear about, and others that they are less interested in. My readers provide wonderful feedback on my writing: they shower me with praise when I write something that helps or encourages them; they call me on it if I say something they don't agree with; and they email me to ask questions that sometimes turn into full-length articles.

Through this, I've learnt that the people who read The Bargain Queen come to the site for positive and realistic views on style. They love practical hints and tips they can use to improve their lives, and want to be inspired by stories of stylish people who live on budgets similar to their own. They want reassurance that they can be their ideal chic self, while also being their ideal financially secure self – that they don't need to buy every beautiful item on a magazine page to have style.

On the flip side, I learnt very quickly that there are some things my readers prefer not to hear about. I exercise a very limited form of self-censorship by writing what's on my mind that's relevant to the blog, and skipping the stuff that's not. For example, while I appreciate beautiful, expensive things, there is enough coverage of these items already. My readers come to my site for affordable things, so that's mostly what I cover. I also refuse to add to the marketing messages out there that

attack people's self-esteem, more out of my own principles than anything readers have demanded. You won't find cellulite remedies or anti-aging treatments on The Bargain Queen, because I'm yet to find any evidence that people cared about cellulite before the creams to 'fix' it were invented. The only other 'no no' on my site is negativity. If I'm having a bad day, my blog is not the place to have a whinge, whine or attack other people.

The Bargain Queen is about the person I've spent years becoming: a person who has beautiful things, but doesn't run up credit card debt to buy them. It's an ideal many people aspire to, and by sharing information that helps other people achieve this ideal as well, I've built up a web site with a devoted following, that is starting to generate a good income for me as well.

The take-home message: if you can help people reconcile their ideal and real selves, it can have a very positive business outcomes.

Summary

- Many techniques from the fashion industry can be applied in the online realm to create experiences which appeal to women
- Digital experience design can benefit from promoting an 'ideal user' similar to the ways in which fashion labels construct their archetypal consumer through the use of branding and fantasy
- Creating aspiration requires going beyond utilitarian design to creating a semblance of a unique identity and experience so that the user feels 'special'
- Fashion blogs exemplify online spaces which offer women the opportunity to commune and write in their own voices, as well as the potential to represent and customise their 'ideal self'.

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