

The new tastemaker

The days of a few magazine editors dominating what's hot and what's not are over. The Internet makes everyone in the know. It's also an easy place to shop.



WEBSITE: Community, content and commerce come together at Fashionair. (www.fashionair.com)

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The Internet is the world's front-row seat to fashion.

You don't have to rummage through crowded store racks or pay for a personal shopper; the Web will do it for you. Aggregator sites and social networks give anyone insider status, offering up-to-the-minute news about sales and new merchandise. Runway photos are posted online minutes after the shows end, and style how-tos are not confined to the pages of glossy magazines; they are everywhere.

The Internet's share of retail clothing sales has been well documented. Although apparel sales overall are down 7.11% in the period from July 2007 to July 2009, online sales have grown 12.55%, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm based in Port Washington, N.Y. But it's the Internet's role as tastemaker that may very well signal the end of the severely coiffed fashion editor as gatekeeper.

"The Internet is the great leveler of trends," said Jane Buckingham, president of L.A.-based trend forecasting firm Trendera. "Previously, only a select group had access to [designer] fashion [shows], but now everyone sees everything. Not only can things be knocked off more quickly, we can buy them more quickly and know what is in fashion more quickly."

Inspiration and advice comes from professional websites built around a common love of clothes and personal blogs, whose authors are enjoying a moment in the sun.

The autumn issue of H&M's in-house magazine looks at "the boys and girls who dictate fashion from their bedrooms," including L.A.'s Cory Kennedy (www.itscorykennedy.com); the Philippines' Bryan Boy (www.bryanboy.com), after whom Marc Jacobs named a purse; and 13-year-old Tavi Williams (www.tavi-thenewgirlintown.blogspot.com), who also appears in the September issues of LOVE and Pop magazines.

Several bloggers turn up in Style.com's list of front-row faces expected at the runway shows this season, including San Diego-based Rumi Neely, 26, (www.fashiontoast.com), who is now designing a collection for RVCA, and Jane Aldridge, the Paris, Texas-based 17-year-old behind Sea of Shoes (seaofshoes.typepad.com), who was tapped to design footwear for Urban Outfitters and model in the fall lookbook for the label Simone. Meanwhile, Penguin recently published a book of photo blogger Scott Schuman's best shots at the Sartorialist (www.thesartorialist.com), and the Gap has asked French blogger Garance Doré to put together some of her photos and sketches to feature in a pop-up shop open during London Fashion Week.

It's not a blog, but at Closet Couture (www.closetcouture.com), the styling advice comes from professionals, for a fee, after users upload photos of themselves in various outfits. StyleHop (www.stylehop.com) and Lookbook.nu (lookbook.nu) invite anyone to do the advising.

"Because every individual has been given this means of expression, you get inspiration from your neighbor, from someone living in Hong Kong, from so many different places," says Sojin Lee, who co-created Fashionair (www.fashionair.com) with "American Idol" guru Simon Fuller. Launched Sept. 3, it is one of several new websites to combine community, content and commerce.

The site is designed to be a forum for users to share style diaries, watch behind-the-scenes movies about designers and hear about trendy items and buy them. Unlike traditional fashion magazines, there is no fashionable figurehead, no monthly editor's letter, but there are experts, including makeup artist Val Garland, celebrity stylist Annabel Tollman and designer Thakoon Panichgul. "We are all about celebrating the breadth and diversity of style," Lee said.

When it comes to wardrobe solutions, the Web is a bottomless well.

Whereas traditional magazines are frequently bound by their advertisers to feature specific, typically very high-end brands, websites are less likely to be, so there is always potential to discover a new designer, store or product.

One of the sites most notable for spotlighting new trends is Polyvore (www.polyvore.com), which functions as a community-created magazine -- a forum for user-generated fashion spreads that are created using collages of runway images and product shots. One spread pays homage to pop singer Avril Lavigne's style, another to the aesthetic of the house of Lanvin. Click on the items in the spreads and you are taken to the Web stores where they can be purchased, whether in London or in Shanghai -- or at the mall.

Of course, the Web is a two-way street. It's a platform for emerging designers to receive attention. And every click is more information for fashion designers and retailers to use when thinking about what kind of clothes to make and how they present them.

New York-based designer Norma Kamali, who has her own signature line and a lower-priced line [NK for Wal-Mart](#), was one of the first designers to launch a website, back in 1996. She says the Internet has become a valuable tool in the creative process, and in production.

"Not only do we get feedback on our retail site, but we get feedback from the Wal-Mart site," Kamali said. "We learn about our mistakes, we learn about what's appropriate and what's not."

New York-based designer Malcolm Harris took this philosophy to a new level. For his One Dress Project, he took himself out of the equation and relied on his customers to tell him what they wanted.

He used MySpace, Facebook and AsmallWorld, another social-networking site, as his design laboratory, interacting with more than 1,000 women around the world over the course of 18 months and asking them questions about what was missing in their wardrobes. The research culminated in a single dress, a viscose jersey wrap style that Harris is selling for \$250 at one-dress.com.

"Women felt as if they were being forced into certain things, forced by magazines, forced by designers," he said.

"In my mind, I kept thinking liberate, liberate, liberate."

Since the launch of Harris' website in June, he says he has sold 3,000 of the \$250 dresses.

So the Internet is giving people a voice in creating fashion too.

"We are becoming a society that wants everything how we want it," said Buckingham, the trend analyst. "Technology allows us to get it."

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