

The Plain Dealer

A Brand New Taste

Teens are graduating to high-end labels in a search for sophistication

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If you are a teenage girl, you might want a Coach purse or already have one. Perhaps you prefer Dooney & Bourke or the quilted paisley accessories from Vera Bradley instead. A silver heart necklace from Tiffany & Co. would go beautifully with a cute kitten top from Baby Phat. And if you are the mother of a teenager, you might be confused.

What is Baby Phat and why has it become the subject of constant nagging? Wasn't Vera Bradley the stuff your own mother used to carry? And why should you buy a \$300 designer purse for your kid? You don't even own one yourself.

Three decades after a Jordache horse-head label on the back pocket seemed like a flash in the pan, youth fashion is more brand-aware than ever, and label-consciousness is striking consumers at a younger age.

Fifteen-year-old Chelsea Kriebel and her friend Noelle Fox, 17, traveled from Canfield, southwest of Youngstown, to Beachwood Place the week after Christmas to shop. Surrounded by women of all ages carrying logo handbags from Coach, Chelsea was perfectly at home.

Inside her Coach tote with green leather accents was a wristlet and a makeup bag, also Coach. Her wallet was a fake of similar style.

"I like the logos and stuff," Chelsea said. "I don't care if I have a real one or fake." (Nonchalance about fake goods is so prevalent among teenagers that marketers even have a word for it, said Michael Wood, president of Teen Research Unlimited. "Authenticitude" refers to the teen belief that authenticity is "an attitude more than a reality.")

Coach products aren't everyday purchases for her, Chelsea said. A small tote retails for nearly \$300, and wristlets go from \$58 to about \$150, depending on style. Chelsea has received the products as gifts. And the green-leather tote was originally her mother's. "We kind of share it," she said.

Kristy Clark, a junior in the fashion merchandising program at Kent State University, said she thinks the high-end labels moved into the youth market on a wave of knockoffs and counterfeits, which led to an appetite for the real thing. Her first Coach purchase was a wristlet she got as a freshman. If she had the money, she said, she'd love something by Chanel.

So far, Clark sees purses as the most common big-label purchase among young people. "I don't see many people buying [high-end] shoes and stuff, but I could see it going there," she said.

If recent history is any indication, it could go there fast. Courtney Dietrich, a 23-year-old financial consultant in Cleveland Heights, was bitten by the Vera Bradley bug during her years at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The quilted fabric purses sell for between \$50 and \$100, but Courtney still considers them moderately expensive.

Yet when she was in high school, girls didn't buy Vera Bradley. They wore whatever the teen shops at the mall were selling. "My friends did not carry Louis Vuitton, Cole-Haan, Dooney & Bourke," said Courtney. "Now it seems like younger and younger girls are wanting that name brand."

At almost any high school, sophisticated brands have become selections in the complicated and ever-changing teen uniform.

How has that happened?

Ken Carbone, a marketing expert and one of the founders of the Carbone Smolan design and branding agency in New York, said today's teens and tweens "place enormous credibility in celebrity, and in things their friends deem valuable."

All a high-end company would have to do, then, is slip one of its designs on Jessica Simpson or Jay-Z and start counting the money, right?

Not quite. Carbone described a complicated youth marketplace in which the evaporation of childhood innocence plays a huge role. Children don't expect to be treated like children anymore. They don't want manufacturers to talk down to them, and they have an uncanny ability to perceive when they're being manipulated.

They also have the money to spend. Various sources put the spending power of American teenagers between \$150 billion and \$200 billion annually. From November 2005 through October 2006, teens 13 through 17 spent \$26.2 billion on clothes, according to the NPD Group, a market research firm that includes fashion in its specialties.

Tonya, a thirtysomething mother shopping at Beachwood Place recently, said her own 15-year-old daughter gets money from her, from her grandmother and through baby-sitting. All of it funds a label-oriented wardrobe. Tonya wouldn't contribute to the high-priced fashion habit if her daughter were a poor student, she added, but she earns straight A's.

Tonya wouldn't reveal her last name because she didn't want to embarrass her daughter—who she said won't even step into teen stores like Rave because they don't carry high-end labels.

Fashion magazines, television and the Internet have created sophisticated young buyers who also have "an unbelievable sense of entitlement," Carbone said. Parents collude in the consumerism of children, he added, and pointed a finger at himself when he noted, "My 16-year-old has been through four iPods already."

Carbone wondered what winning the teen popularity contest will do for fashion houses once associated with the country-club set. "You don't want to blow 200 years of legacy," he said. He mentioned Louis Vuitton. "They may have gained a new market, but I think they're losing the market that built them," he said.

But that is not a teenager's problem.

No. A teenager's problem is social survival in the perilous arena of adolescence. It is true they have greater access to beautiful fashions than did teens of yore, and almost everyone likes to look good.

But if they can choose to buy a pair of Uggs or a Burberry sling bag, can they also choose not to?

That, too, is complicated. After a certain age, the decision to wear the generic clothing they got away with in elementary school can carry social consequences.

"It's just jeans and a shirt, but now you're in high school," Aneshia Jones, 14, explained. "You've got a reputation."

Two days into the new year, Aneshia was hanging out with her friend Debora Barnes, 15, at Tower City. The girls are both students at SuccessTech Academy in Cleveland, where a loose dress code keeps students from flaunting their best labels. But today Aneshia wore her Baby Phat puffer jacket, new for Christmas, and a pair of Nike boots. Debora had on S. Carter tennis shoes, a signature brand from hip-hop star Jay-Z. When the girls got talking about popular brands, the conversation became an endless stew of labels, some aimed at teens, some with tony pedigrees.

Teenagers “use clothes for communication,” Aneshia said, and she pointed out that labels are just as important to boys as to girls. If you wear the right clothes, people might want to hang out with you, she said. If you don’t, they might decide you’re “ugly.”

Even as the girls said clothes shouldn’t be so important, they were naming labels they saw on strangers 30 feet away.

It shouldn’t matter what people wear, Aneshia said. But sometimes it does.