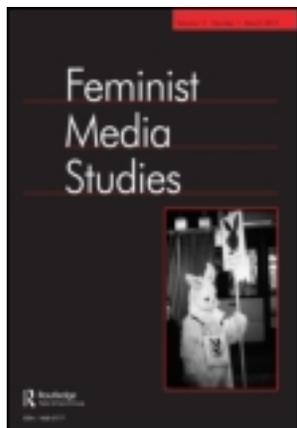


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“SUSIE BUBBLE IS A SIGN OF THE TIMES”

The embodiment of success in the Web 2.0 economy

Minh-Ha T. Pham

This essay takes as its point of critical departure the digital stardom of Susanna Lau, aka Susie Bubble, the most recognizable and respected fashion blogger in the world, in order to consider the historical formation of success in the postmillennial digital economy. By examining Lau as an embodied sign rather than an exceptional figure of success, I am concerned with the technical, cultural, and economic forces that give shape to hegemonic notions of success and the ideal subject it produces. More specifically, I hope to demonstrate the cultural frames that structure our ways of seeing and recognizing successful individuals in the post millennium by highlighting the gendered and racial construction of the ideal Web 2.0 subject. The aim of my discussion is to show that the discursive construction of Lau’s success is reflective of emerging global patterns born out of the rising significance of Asians and young women (especially young Asian women) as consumers and producers in the digital economy.

KEYWORDS fashion blog; Susie Bubble; creative economy; digital self; neoliberalism; entrepreneur of the self

Introduction

She has been called “the reigning queen of the fashion blogosphere” (Wafa Alobaidat 2009) a Gladwellian “maven” *par excellence* (Imran Amed 2007), and “a true fashion pioneer” (Hayley Phelan 2008). Separately, each of these designations reveals very little about the significance of Susanna Lau, aka Susie Bubble, the most recognizable and respected fashion blogger in the world. Taken together though, the lofty praise given to this twenty-six-year-old British Chinese icon of social media and style is suggestive of broader shifts in the social configuration of success in the postmillennial digital economy.

To be clear, Lau has not personally taken up the mantle of the exemplary fashion subject; instead, it is a popular narrative produced *about* her by an ever-growing collectivity of fans, online and print fashion journalists, and media institutions (including *Vogue* (UK, French, Italian, and US Teen editions), *i-D* magazine, *NYLON Japan*, *The New York Times*, the

Financial Times, and the UK's *The Independent* and *The Guardian*). Lau, however, repeatedly emphasizes in interviews and on her wildly popular blog, *Style Bubble* (created in March 2006), that she never set out to acquire a mass audience. She describes the blog as a "selfish endeavor" (Amed 2007) and herself as "a fashion-outsider/enthusiast" (Lau 2010). Yet, Lau's popularity is incontrovertible. Within one year of launching her blog, *Style Bubble* drew between seven and ten thousand readers daily (Amed 2007). Today, *Style Bubble* has more than tripled its audience to thirty-three thousand daily readers (Lau 2010) and 170,000 monthly page views.¹ The largest majority of Lau's readers are from the US and secondarily from the UK (Lau 2010).

The geographic distribution of Lau's readership is typical in the blogosphere and indeed of the Internet at large. The deregulation of the media market, beginning in the 1980s with the break-up of AT&T,² paved the way for the rise of global media empires that are predominately English-speaking and/or are headquartered in the Global North—giving cities like London, where Lau is based, a favorable structural position in the new information economy. Of the top three telecom global giants, two are US corporations—AT&T and Verizon—with the third being Japan's NTT (CNN 2010). Among second tier firms, between one-third and one-half come from North America while most of the rest are from Western Europe and Japan (McChesney 2001). Users of the Internet and especially Web 2.0 technologies are thus, by and large, English-speaking—American English being the (unofficial but *de facto*) language of the Internet.³

Although *Style Bubble's* online traffic is impressive, especially for a single-author independent blog, it is not exceptional in two ways. First, the globalized economic and cultural domination of Western telecommunication industries has a lot to do with making possible, although certainly not inevitable, Lau's popularity. Users in the Global North (particularly those who are from middle-class backgrounds) are thus structurally predisposed to Internet success. Second, other equally celebrated fashion blogs like Jane Aldridge's *Sea of Shoes* (350,000 monthly page views) and Scott Schuman's *The Sartorialist* (2.8 million monthly page views)—both white American bloggers—draw far greater online traffic than Lau. These numbers, it is important to note, are only estimates. There is no standard methodology or framework for measuring blog traffic. Different tracking agencies and bloggers place varying emphasis on advertising campaigns, endorsement deals, guest design stints, daily/monthly unique users, daily/monthly page views, Twitter followers, Google News mentions, and hosted ads. Nonetheless, the numbers are good indications of the overall impact of fashion blogs (over two million strong⁴) as well as Lau's relative influence in contemporary popular culture.

Despite *Style Bubble's* comparatively modest online traffic and Lau's advantageous structural position in the Anglophone West, narratives constructing her as an exemplary self-stylist, social media user, and consumer—in short, as an ideal neoliberal subject—persist. Evidence that Lau represents the new face of neoliberal subjectivity is found in an ad banner that appeared on numerous fashion websites for the popular online retailer Moxsie. Without mentioning Lau's name or blog, the e-tailer's ad featured models styled to look like her (see Figures 1 & 2).

Commenting on the banner, *Racked NY* (a corporate fashion blog) pronounced that "Moxsie's nod to blogger Susie Bubble is a sign of the times" (*Racked NY* 2010). Further observations among bloggers that the hairstyles for Erin Fetherston's Fall 2010 show and for Lanvin's show in Paris were styled to look "like Susie Bubbles again" seem to affirm that *Racked NY* may be right (Tiffany Elton 2010a). In an open comment to Lau, blogger Tiffany Elton notes, "susie bubble [sic] you know you are doing something right when half the



FIGURE 1
Moxsie banner ad

runway shows from the big leagues had your hair, I think unconsciously or consciously you got them!" (2010b). So how did a young British Chinese woman become not simply a global style icon but a model of exemplary neoliberal subjectivity?

This essay considers the technocultural and economic forces that shape the success narrative Lau embodies. By examining Lau as *an embodied sign* rather than an exceptional figure of success in the postmillennial digital fashion economy, I mean to emphasize the structural forces and trends that give shape to hegemonic notions of success and the ideal subject it produces. This is in no way intended to slight Lau's personal achievements and talents which are clearly extraordinary (although, as I've pointed out, not exceptional). To understand *success* as an historical formation rather than an individual (and individualizing) characteristic is to emphasize the structural conditions and social norms that define and set the standard for success. My argument inverts but nonetheless follows Michel Foucault's point about criminality. In *Abnormal*, he explains that juridical – punitive systems operate as



FIGURE 2
Susanna Lau a.k.a. Susie Bubble

technologies for categorizing individuals who resemble their crime before they commit it (Michel Foucault 2003, p. 19). Walter Lippmann, whose *Public Opinion* is a foundational text in the field of public relations, puts it more succinctly: “We do not first see and then define; we define and then see” (1965, pp. 54–55). The category of the successful, a dialectical other to the criminal, is reflective of historical legacies of power and privilege or, in J. Jack Halberstam’s (2006) words, the “experiential and theoretical territories of success and failure” to which individuals are pre-associated.

By highlighting the gendered and racial construction of the ideal Web 2.0 subject, I hope to demonstrate the cultural frames that structure our ways of seeing and recognizing “successful” individuals in the contemporary historical moment. My discussion intends to show that the discursive construction of Lau’s success is reflective of emerging global patterns born out of the rising significance of Asians and young women (especially young Asian women) as consumers and producers in the digital economy. Because global patterns

of commerce and culture (with regard to fashion, above all) are inherently dynamic, my discussion is necessarily a partial one. I am concerned not with the nature of success but rather with the cultural economic conditions that make possible historical articulations of success.

Fashion Heads in the Digital Cloud

When Lau began *Style Bubble* in 2006, important breakthroughs in e-commerce (e.g. the invention of online banking in 1994 and the launching of Amazon and EBay in 1995) and online social networking (notably, Friendster in 2002 and MySpace in 2003) had already established computer-mediated modes of communication and consumerism as everyday practices. Early fashion blogs *LookOnline Daily Fashion Report* and *She She Me* (both launched in 2002) provided important precedents as well; but perhaps even more important than these digital technologies to the success of *Style Bubble* is the invisible technology of neoliberalism that operated, in uneven ways, around the turn of the twenty-first century to bring into alignment the commercial goals of fashion and the political promise of democracy.

As with all previous eras of fashion’s democratization, the contemporary one is born from changes to the material and symbolic production, consumption, and distribution of fashion. The defining event of the present era was the “masstige” partnership between Isaac Mizrahi and the big box retailer Target.⁵ In 2003, the designer, who had once been bankrolled by the legendary Parisian fashion house Chanel and whose clothes sold at high end stores like Barney’s and Bloomingdale’s, agreed to create a diffusion line of classically-designed fashion sportswear exclusively for Target’s female customers. Commenting on the partnership, Mizrahi says,

This new collection will offer affordable luxury for every woman, everywhere. My clothes have always celebrated the style of American women of all ages and all walks of life. Now, through my partnership with Target, I can offer my designs to more women than ever before at accessible prices. (Retail Merchandiser 2003)

He also remarks that the collection “is just so democratic. My goal is that you won’t always be able to tell the difference between what is Target and what is couture” (Ruth La Ferla 2004, p. 8). The Mizrahi for Target label was a huge commercial and cultural success generating \$1.5 billion in sales as well as a new fashion era in which cheap chic fashion and the Everywoman consumer were central.

To illustrate the extraordinary success of the Mizrahi for Target collection, it is useful to compare it to an earlier masstige partnership—the one between consummate New York City fashion designer Halston and the suburban retailer J.C. Penney in the early 1980s. Not only was Halston’s mass market diffusion line less commercially successful (reports list sales in the millions), his desire to design clothes for the “chain store and mall” customer was roundly panned by the fashion world (June Weir 1983). Soon after J.C. Penney released the Halston line, Bergdorf Goodman (who helped launch Halston’s career in the 1960s) dropped his luxury label from their stock and Halston was unceremoniously fired from his own company.

In contrast, Mizrahi’s mass market partnership was both highly profitable and widely praised for its democratic objectives. Boldface named designers like Karl Lagerfeld, Roberto Cavalli, Vivienne Westwood, and Oscar de la Renta followed Mizrahi’s business model by collaborating with mass market retailers from Payless Shoe Source and Kohl’s department store to mall staples H&M and Macy’s. Style icon Sarah Jessica Parker made cheap chic fashion

her bailiwick when she teamed with discount (and now defunct) retailer Steve and Barry's to create a line of fashionable clothes and accessories that she promised would never cost more than \$19.98 for any single piece.⁶ Meanwhile, prominent tastemakers such as American designer Tom Ford and Gucci creative director Frida Giannini were downright boastful in their admissions that they regularly shop at the Gap, Banana Republic, Target, and H&M. Mass market cheap chic fashions provided the means and motivation for non-elite individuals to embrace neoliberal ideals about the self-enterprising and self-enhancing subject.

Towards the end of the 2000s, the global economic crisis, widespread under- and unemployment, and the growing turn to eco-fashion strained the industry's love affair with cheap chic—now the scapegoat for a severely declining luxury sector. Many, like former *Glamour* magazine journalist Michelle Lee (2003), derided cheap chic as “fast fashion,” the sartorial equivalent of fast food (with all the classed ethics and aesthetics that this implies). Others were more conjectural, but no less condemning, asking, “If fashion is for everyone—is it fashion?”⁷ But as user-friendly interactive digital technologies such as Flickr, Wordpress, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter gained a stronger hold among fashion consumers who enjoyed sharing, manipulating, creating, and transmitting fashion self-portraits, text, and videos through the Internet and mobile web, the sartorial discourse of neoliberal democracy found its second life. In 2007, Pulitzer Prize winning fashion writer Robin Givhan observed, “The average person is taking ownership of [fashion].” For many, the truth of Givhan's statement is exemplified by the media star power of Susie Bubble, a first-generation British Chinese young woman with no prior training or experience in either fashion or journalism.

It's important to note that consumers are not the only ones embracing Web 2.0 technologies; designers are using these technologies to actively pursue new and more diverse markets. For example, it is becoming standard fashion business practice to live stream runway shows to the Internet, the mobile web, and, in the case of Alexander Wang in 2010, to a Times Square billboard. Short fashion films—really, lookbooks in cinematic form—are also gaining favor in the fashion industry, giving anyone with a high speed Internet connection visual, if not material, access to luxury fashion.⁸ In September 2009, 56.8 percent of the top five hundred fashion retailers had a Facebook page, 41.4 percent had a YouTube channel, 28.6 percent were on MySpace and 20.4 percent were tweeting (Cate T. Corcoran 2009). The dramatic increase in retailers' online visibility translated into a 61 percent boost to the online traffic of luxury brand websites in 2009 (Imran Amed 2009). The prevalence of digital media communications among fashion producers and consumers indicates a shift in fashion's economy towards “immaterial commodities” (e.g. blogs) as new sources of capital accumulation.

The increase in luxury designers' online visibility indicates, too, a sea change in the industry's perspective about the value of the mass market. While Bergdorf Goodman worried that Halston's association with a mass retailer degraded his luxury brand, designers now purposefully court such mass market and media recognition. A presence in the digital commons especially is an indication of the designer's cultural relevance and their understanding of shifting labor market structures. As the outspoken designer and Council of Fashion Designers of America president Diane von Furstenberg, whose own online sales increased after she got a Twitter account, declared, “Ignoring the Internet [and social media] is madness” (Hitha Prabhakar 2010). Other luxury designers, such as Michael Kors, Alexander Wang, and Proenza Schouler, also saw upswings in sales and/or brand awareness after live streaming their runway shows. Since Kors began live streaming his shows in 2008,

his brand “saw a 111 percent increase in page views from the spring 2009 live stream to the fall 2009 one. There was another 81 percent jump from the fall 2009 show to the spring 2010 event” (Lauren Benet Stephenson & Rachel Strugatz 2010). Many more designers are including blogging stations and tweet decks in show spaces. While some assert that social media spectacles like these are nothing more than marketing ploys to show off a designer’s technocultural relevance (and thus curry cool cred with the highly influential consumer market segment that is the *Teen Vogue* and *Nylon* fashion crowd), their impact is more than symbolic. A recent study finds that instantaneous user-centered viral marketing—also called word-of-mouth or word-of-mouse (WOM) marketing—“is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions” (Jacques Bughin, Jonathan Doogan & Ole Jørgen Vetvik 2010). It is no surprise, then, that the WOM marketing industry is growing at an exponential rate. In 2001, US companies spent \$76 million in WOM marketing; in 2006, spending increased nearly 67 percent to \$981 million. Analysts expect that by 2013, US companies will spend \$3 billion on viral marketing (Shellie Karabell 2009).

The influence and expertise of fashion’s social media users—bloggers not least among them—are rarely disputed anymore among the fashion establishment.⁹ In fact, fashion bloggers are increasingly being integrated into institutional sites. It is no longer newsworthy that designers reserve highly coveted front row seats at their runway shows for bloggers while relegating buyers and chief executives from such iconic department stores as Saks Fifth Avenue, Neiman Marcus, and Bergdorf Goodman to the second and third rows. And although there were some initial concerns among print journalists that bloggers might dethrone them, this particular digital divide seems to have been reconciled. Bloggers are now popular editorial subjects in fashion magazines including *Harper’s Bazaar* (September 2007), *Elle UK* (September 2009), *Sketchbook* (October 2009), and *Vogue* (March 2010). Some have been contracted as guest photographers and writers. Schuman’s commissioned work for *GQ* and *Esquire* is by now well-known as is Lau’s 2008 appointment as the commissioning editor of *Dazed Digital*. (Although Lau has since left *Dazed Digital* to focus her attention entirely on her blog, the media company’s recruitment of Lau is a watershed moment in the history of fashion blogs and a Web 2.0 legend.)

Additionally, fashion and design companies are turning more and more to bloggers as insightful and discerning trend forecasters, cool aggregators, and unofficial promoters. As a result, a host of design stints between bloggers and fashion companies have flourished: Rodarte and Tavi Gevinson (*Style Rookie*); Urban Outfitters and Jane Aldridge (*Sea of Shoes*); and Dannijo and Rumi Neely (*Fashion Toast*), to name only a few. Some, like Rodarte and Marc Jacobs, have named bloggers, rather than models, as their fashion muses. And in September 2009, a record number of bloggers (eighty, in total) received invitations for New York Fashion Week—this is up from forty in 2006 (Newswire 2009). Not only are fashion bloggers a (mostly) respected part of the fashion industry, their social media skills are sought out by major players in the information economy including the Web behemoth Google who recently tapped fashion bloggers when it needed to understand how new media is being consumed and used (Lauren Sherman 2010).

Fashion’s immaterial commodities—fashion blogs, vlogs, viral marketing campaigns, online advertising, and computer-mediated communications—have become key sources of capital accumulation. Market researchers predict that by 2014 interactive fashion media will grow to become a \$55 billion industry and represent 21 percent of all marketing spending (Corcoran 2009). These numbers are especially staggering when we consider that fashion’s traditional material commodities, like the luxury stock in the aforementioned

iconic department stores, as well as print magazines, are on the wane. Witness the decline of advertising in *Vogue* and *Lucky* in 2009 (each 44 percent), *Allure* (41 percent), and *Glamour* and *Vanity Fair* (15 and 15.5 percent, respectively). Some magazines, like *Jane*, *Cargo*, and *Men's Vogue*, shuttered their offices altogether (Stephanie Clifford 2009; Shira Ovide & Russell Adams 2009).

But fashion's "digital revolution" has reorganized more than the economic configuration of the fashion commodity system from material to immaterial commodities and from industrial manufacturing to the media and market consumption habits of online consumers; these shifts have also reconfigured the cultural frames of the new economy. To quote the authors of *Growing Up Girl: Psycho-Social Explorations of Class and Gender*: "[T]he economic man of liberalism . . . is now female" (Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey & June Melody 2001, p. 3). I suggest below that she is also increasingly Asian.

From Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld

A lot of academic and popular attention in recent years has focused on the "feminization of labor" in the postindustrial or sometimes neoindustrial economy (Lynne Chisholm 1997; Peter Dwyer & Johanna Wyn 2001; Anita Harris 2003; Helga Krüger 1990; Ali Rattansi & Ann Phoenix 1997; Hanna Rosin 2010). In a time when manufacturing is in decline and information/knowledge sectors and the highly skilled and flexible casual labor force they demand are on the rise, skills traditionally associated with femininity (e.g. communication, cultural production, and self-care) are greatly valued. Such skills characterize what social media consultant Greg Vaynerchuk calls a "thank you economy" in which "[t]he ability to digitally listen, respond and nurture a one-to-one relationship with the consumer is going to transform the way companies do business" (Vikram Alexei Kansara 2010). "Success will come through 'outcaring everyone,'" he says. In the service-based "thank you economy," the accumulation of social and affective capital is part and parcel of the accumulation of financial capital and thus requires a perceptive, creative, and flexible worker. It is as such that women and girls have been positioned as the ideal flexible subjects for, as Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody explain in their book *Growing Up Girl*, flexibility itself is a historically feminine characteristic:

It is women, of course, who have faced reinvention so obviously. The transition from mother and housewife in a long-term monogamous marriage to a working woman often bringing up children alone is a large one. If we also add that women have long been invited constantly to remake themselves as the (changing) object of male desire, then it becomes clear that women have long had to face the recognition that the unitary subject is a fraud and that constant and perpetual self-invention is necessary. (2001, p. 9)

The feminization of labor is manifest not only in scholarly discourse but also in an array of governmental and non-governmental sites including the US Department of Health and Human Services' *Girl Power!* website (directed at nine to thirteen-year-old girls), the FDA's Girl Power and You! coalition, UNICEF's Girl Power and Potential reception, the US-based NGO Girlstart, and of course Oprah Winfrey's Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa. While the San Francisco think tank, the Institute for Global Futures, is not concerned exclusively with girls and women, its CEO's forecast that the future digital entrepreneur is a young girl [who will "perhaps . . . [launch a] new athletic shoe business" (Canton 2001) reaffirms, Anita Harris has observed, "the importance placed on [young women] as self-made symbols for new forms of citizenship" (2003, p. 77).

In commercial culture, images of what Harris (2003) calls “can-do girls” are discursively articulated through the visual and textual vocabularies of neoliberal feminism. Nike’s highly successful Play Like a Girl campaign provides one of the most powerful images of the can-do girl. It draws together discourses of Girl Power and consumer citizenship to make fashion consumerism coextensive with feminism and self-responsibility and self-invention emblems and entitlements of female empowerment. The consumption-based model of feminism underwrites, too, the television and film plots of *Sex and the City*—a popular object of feminist critique in recent years. These and many more familiar examples of popular feminism (sometimes understood as post-feminism) discursively endow the neoliberal feminine subject with the responsibility of—rather than the right to—her own health, wealth, and happiness. How well she carries out this responsibility is dependent upon, according to neoliberal logic, the choices she makes in the lifestyle market.

If neoliberal citizenship is contingent on one’s rational participation in the market then the rise of Chinese consumers in the postmillennial fashion economy suggests a racial dimension to the formation of exemplary neoliberal subjectivity. Although critics insist that media speculation about the economic power of the Chinese nouveaux riche are overblown, it is precisely the profusion of these claims that is the salient point here. Economists and entrepreneurs, especially in the debt-ridden US, Japan, and European countries, are paying a lot of attention to the rapid rise of the Chinese economy and, with it, the new market power of Chinese consumers. *The New York Times* recently proclaimed that China was poised to “become the world’s next great consumer society” (David Leonhardt 2010, p. 56). Evidence of this is found in China’s recent “leapfrogging” of the United States to become the world’s second largest consumer of luxury goods following Japan (Lars Tunbjork 2010). This led *Vogue China*’s editor-in-chief Angelica Cheung to quip that “in less than a decade, China has gone from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld!” (Samantha V. Chang 2010, p. 324).

The rising Chinese economy has significantly altered sartorial geographies shifting the centers of fashion from New York, London, Paris, and Milan to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Global management consulting firm Bain & Company report that between 2009 and 2010 China’s luxury market sector surged 30 percent while Europe’s rose only 6 percent and the US declined by 15 percent (Zoe Wood 2010). It is no wonder then that, in the last several years, we are seeing leading American and European fashion designers, including Burberry, Karl Lagerfeld, John Galliano, Phillip Lim, and Marc Jacobs, hosting fashion shows in these Asian metropolitan cities as well as a new wave of “Asian chic.” So significant is the Chinese fashion consumer that some European and American brands have begun creating exclusive lines for them. These collections are “infused,” as the *Los Angeles Times* recently put it, “with Asian sensibilities in look, feel and size” (John Boudreau 2011). Less surprising, though nonetheless shocking, was the decision by the Italian fashion house Prada in March 2011 to take its \$2 billion IPO to the Hong Kong exchange where it would be “closer to the retailer’s fastest-growing region,” “shunning,” as the Bloomberg news website put it, the Italian exchange (Elisa Martinuzzi 2011). While there have been disastrous missteps along the way (e.g. Lagerfeld’s yellowface fashion film *Paris–Shanghai: A Fantasy*¹⁰), it is clear that American and European fashion designers are actively courting Chinese consumers of luxury fashion (a tacitly feminine consumer category).

The rising Chinese luxury fashion market has also had an effect on ancillary industries such as fashion modeling, where more and more Asian models are being cast for print and runway work. China’s Du Juan, Liu Wen (the first Asian face of Estée Lauder), Bonnie Chen, and Lily Zhi; South Korea’s Hyoni Kang, So Young Kang, and Lee Hyun; and Japan’s Tao

Okamoto—all subjects in Stephen Meisel’s recent two-page *Vogue* spread (December 2010) titled “Asia Major”—are now globally recognized fashion faces, if not names. An article in the *New York Daily News* predicted Wen would be the first Asian supermodel (Yi 2011). While the increase in fashion campaigns and editorials featuring Asian models is certainly an economic response by the fashion industry, its cultural effects are real as *Vogue* fashion writer Samantha V. Chang’s comments illustrate:

How I wish I could have seen the Asian models of today staring back at me from magazine pages or television screens when I was a Korean-American teenager in the Midwest, wrestling with foundation shades of “bisque,” “honey,” and “sand” in my local Walgreens . . . They would have felt familiar, igniting a spark not necessarily of validation, but at least of recognition. (Chang 2010, p. 300)

Not only are the identities and bodies of young Asian women increasingly recognized and reaffirmed in digital visual culture, they are privileged figures in the multi-billion dollar global industry that is the contemporary fashion media complex. In addition to Susie Bubble, many other young Asian women are widely-admired as self-made fashion authorities and/or style icons such as Vietnamese American Michelle Phan, a self-proclaimed Internet beauty “guru” and the first female YouTube star to reach one million subscribers; Chinese Americans Helen Zhu and Corinne Chan, founders of *Chictopia*, a “site to watch” according to leading industry periodical *Women’s Wear Daily*; and Japanese American Rumi Neely whose blog *Fashion Toast* led to a modeling job for a Forever 21 campaign and to her image being plastered on New York City buses, tour buses, and a Times Square billboard. Still, many more remain largely unknown like the anonymous blogger behind *Another Asian Fashion Blogger*. Her minor status in the fashion blogosphere is indicated by a number of factors but most obviously by the total absence of reader comments. So while her blog name is a wry acknowledgement of the rise of Asian female fashion bloggers/vloggers, her scant online traffic is a reminder of the ongoing asymmetries of power in digital environments even among this apparent privileged class.¹¹

This corrects, I hope, the popular perception that Asian fashion bloggers (women as well as men) are numerically dominant. Simply put, there are no statistical data supporting this. While many of the most recognized fashion and style bloggers/vloggers are Asian, popularity is not a measure of population. Historically embedded continuities of race and beauty (for openers) produce social, cultural, and economic asymmetries in digital visual culture that severely limit the majority of users’ participation in this ostensibly open domain. This includes as well some Asian bloggers whose configurations of subjectivity are non-normative in terms of language, class, complexion, body, and/or sexuality.

Contrary to the popular rhetoric about the digital democratization of fashion media, most bloggers are unrecognized as successful journalists or stylemakers—regardless of the quality of their digital content or size of their online audience. The online traffic of African American fashion blogs like *The Fashion Bomb* outrank or are comparable to more popular US fashion blogs, yet African American bloggers do not receive nearly the same levels of national and global attention conferred on some of their White and Asian English-speaking counterparts. With the notable exceptions of Robin Givhan’s short-lived fashion blog *Off the Runway* and the Brooklyn-based blog *Street Etiquette*, African American blogs have been largely denied equal support from the powerhouses of the fashion media (Thomas 2010).

But what does the burgeoning Chinese economy and its luxury market consumers have to do with Susie Bubble? After all, Lau is British-born and ethnically identifies as a “Hong Kong-er”—a point for which some of her mainland Chinese-identifying readers have taken her to task. Yet it is precisely Lau’s diasporic location outside of China in the Western cities of London and Hong Kong, I suggest, that partially conditions the possibility of her success. As I have already mentioned, the structures of Web 2.0 environments privilege middle-class users in the Anglophone Global North. In addition, the combination of neoliberalism’s new configurations of race and gender discussed above confers onto Lau’s identity social recognizability. Sameness and difference are carefully calibrated to simultaneously articulate the aspirational digital subject to be at once distinctive and familiar, particular and universal. Lau’s gender and ethnic difference is contained and made familiar by her English fluency, Euro-American cultural references, her British citizenship, and her style personality. It is as such that Lau, as an embodied sign of success in the Web 2.0 era, is rendered a positive visual symbol of globalization—“a sign of the times” in the words of *Racked NY*.

To explore further Lau’s contradictory but complementary embodiment of familiarity and difference, I want to consider the aesthetic and racial signification of Lau’s style choices. In particular, I will focus on two sites at which the meanings of her blogger identity are most often produced: Lau’s unconventional sartorial sensibility and her more conventional hairstyle.

Unlike countless other fashion bloggers whose sartorial sensibilities are neatly located within dominant style categories (e.g. preppy, professional, urban), Lau’s style is much harder to pin down. Rather than the fashion uniform of solid blacks, grays, and taupes, Lau’s outfits are frequently a riotous mix of bright colors, prints, lengths, and textures. Her self-photos evoke any number of fashion and non-fashion adjectives: street chic (exactly *which* street is always up for grabs), zany, glamorous, to name only a few. Her signature style is precisely her refusal to have one (see Figures 3–5). Lau’s fashion blog also includes a vast range of photographic subjects from fashion icons to fashion models and fellow fashion bloggers (including her boyfriend Steve whose blog is called *Style Salvage*) to craftspeople, cartoons, and Ikea (see Figures 3–5). While Lau is hardly averse to mega luxury labels, she has been an enthusiastic booster for established and emerging independent designers in burgeoning fashion cities in Scandinavia, Asia, and the US (Lau 2007).

Absent of images or advice about “body conscious clothing” or “fashion must-haves,” *Style Bubble* is a hodge-podge of self-photos, other people’s photos, videos, and personal and fashion stories (found in the blog posts as well as in paratextual blog pages such as About Me, FAQ, etc.). The collective components of her fashion blog create a lifestyle biography of a fearless fashion outsider. It’s a multimodal digital self-portrait or what Gary Alan Fine terms “identity art”—an art object defined not by genre or style but by the artist’s outsider identity. “It is their *lack*, rather than their attributes, that defines them” (2003, p. 156). And indeed, Lau’s lack endears her to her multitude of readers: her lack of formal training as fashion journalist, photographer, or stylist—she readily admits she’s no authority when it comes to style (“I don’t think my taste is that sophisticated . . . I still go for really tacky, really stupid and banal things”) and often demurs from questions about “breaking into” the fashion industry (“I’m not really fit to give out advice like that seeing as I’m not strictly speaking IN the fashion industry”) (Lau 2010); her lack of a regular industry job (recall that she voluntarily resigned from *Dazed Digital* to focus on her blog full-time); and her lack of a conventional fashion sensibility evidenced by her willingness—indeed, her



FIGURE 3
Outfit by Pitti Uomo 81

inclination—to buck many conventional fashion rules about style, taste, beauty, and elitism. If Lau is any fashion type, she might well be a “hipster,” a trendsetter and cool-spotter who’s at home in fashion’s subcultures. But Lau defies even this category; she lacks (again) the smug irony, cynicism, or disaffection of stereotyped hipsters.

As well as a sartorial outsider, Lau is a racial outsider to mainstream fashion, which continues to privilege white Euro-American bodies and standards of beauty. Rather than trying to fit into fashion’s racial aesthetic, Lau proudly wears a hairstyle that has long been a visible sign of Asianness.

Since the inaugural days of her blog, Lau’s hairstyle has not changed. Her long straight dark hair is worn—with little variation—either pinned up in a loose bun or ponytail or straight down. Either way, her thick bangs, which are always bluntly-cut to just barely graze the top of her eyes, are clearly visible in each of her photographs. Her hair exemplifies the *Asian girl’s* haircut, made popular in the US in the 1920s by the Chinese American movie star Anna May Wong. Wong’s hairstyle was so intimately identified with Asian difference



FIGURE 4
Pom Pom Sweater by TopShop

that when the art director Ali Hubert described Wong's Chineseness he noted her hair first: "Externally, she appears *American*: smart, confident, and chicly dressed. But inside, she is purely *Chinese*, wearing long hair, and believing in reincarnation" (quoted in Yiman Wang 2005, p. 164). While hair is not located "inside," Hubert's conflation of Wong's hairstyle with an internal authentic Chinese self demonstrates well the racialization of style with regard to Asians. And Wong herself subscribed to this racial discourse of style. When Paramount asked Wong to cut her hair into a bob, she rejected the suggestion. According to a studio press release, "when it attempted to de-orientalize the most famous Chinese actress in the world ... Miss Wong refused the 'modernization' of a bobbed hair dress on the grounds that her exotic roles call for correct Oriental demeanor" (Shirley Jennifer Lim 2006, p. 83).

While Wong constructs the relationship between her hair and identity in much more pragmatic terms than Hubert, both of these examples clearly indicate the complex politics of Asian hairstyles. Kobena Mercer (1987) has written with regard to Black hairstyles that "our hair, like our skin, is a highly sensitive surface on which competing definitions of 'the



FIGURE 5

Dress by House of Dagmar

beautiful' are played out in struggle" (1987, p. 37). In related but different ways, Asian hairstyles can also function as a visible sign (and sometimes stigma) of race. What was desirable and exotic for Wong in 1920s Hollywood was, for me, as one of the few Asian kids in a lower-middle-class predominantly White and Chicano Southern California suburban elementary school in the 1980s, a source of racial embarrassment. Even my little sister teased that my hair—we could not yet name our cultural referent—made me look "so Asian." And yet in this moment of globalization, the same style of personhood visually and aesthetically signifies the capitalist promise of Asian economies and consumers rather than their threat to capitalism (as it did in the 1980s).

It's important to note that while Lau's hairstyle is a visible sign of racial otherness, her consumer practices and style choices are decidedly within Western fashion's mainstream. Lau repeatedly differentiates herself from Mainland Chinese. Her British citizenship and Hong Kong ethnicity are constructed and reaffirmed through numerous posts in which she

eschews the conspicuous consumption of logo-ed luxury products by Mainland Chinese consumers. She writes in one post:

[T]here’s the unfortunate fact that a lot of wealthy people from Mainland China frequent Louis Vuitton and ransack the stores as if it’s a Sunday market . . . for instance, the couple I was with [Chinese friends of her cousin] tried to buy the entire set of limited edition Monogram Groom collection and the SA’s [sales associates] refused on grounds that the collection was so limited. It’s also to do with the fact that the counterfeit industry in China is booming so much that such excessive buying leads SA’s to be suspicious of these people taking the goods back to counterfeit factories in China as templates for the fakes. Therefore, I carry a bad smell of stigma with me, being Chinese going into any Louis Vuitton store. (Susanna Lau 2006)

This is not the only time Lau has differentiated herself from Mainland Chinese. The specter of the tacky Chinese luxury consumer stereotype is raised again in a Style Council discussion in the December 2011 issue of *Bon Magazine* (Susanna Lau 2011). When fashion consultant and stylist Valentine Fillol-Cordier disparages Chinese consumers’ fashion taste (“you can’t pretend to have lots of taste if you’re simply buying all that shit and spending tons of money”), Lau, one of the council members, does not disagree. In the fashion world, taste judgments are a form of coded racial language that articulates, in this case, Chineseness with fakeness (fake taste and fake products).

Thus, Lau’s fashion identity online and offline is that of the popular outsider. As an outsider, Lau is an antidote to the homogeneity of mass commercial fashion. She’s eminently unique and authentic. Her authenticity, flowing from her outsider identity, is taken as natural rather than contrived. Outsider artists, as Fine explains, are “unburdened by assumptions of strategic careerism or lofty intellectualizing. In this, in their *outsider* role, separate from images of a corrupt elite, they are ostensibly ennobled” (Fine 2003, p. 155). Lau injects back into fashion the art that is so often lost in the business of fashion.

And yet, Lau’s outsidership has proven to be lucrative in material and extramaterial ways. Her capacity to accumulate readers, fans, and sales is a skill that is much admired and sought after by the mainstream fashion industry especially in the Digital Age when, as I’ve mentioned before, fashion’s economy is shifting towards immaterial commodities as new sources of capital accumulation. After Lau posted a photograph of herself wearing lilac and pink-striped vintage cocktail pyjamas, the small London antique market she purchased them from was inundated with customers wanting to buy the same pyjamas. Says the shop owner, “My phone was ringing off the hook. People called me from all over the country and beyond asking me for those pyjamas!”¹² The digital arts and practices of this young British Chinese woman blogger yield material effects. For three months in the autumn of 2010, cocktail pyjamas—a style of dressing down popular among affluent hostesses of the early 1930s—became all the rage once again. Since then, Lau has collaborated with a broad range of fashion institutions and icons from the Gap to Daphne Guinness. Throughout the life span of her blog, Lau has shown over and over that outsidership can be a “value-added quality” (Fine 2003, p. 175).

The notion of popular outsidership is not an oxymoron. In fact, these terms are mutually constitutive. The more Lau constructs and presents herself as an outsider (especially in a cultural sphere that valorizes difference and distinction as fashion does), the greater her authenticity and, consequently, the better her commercial credibility. As

Richard A. Peterson (2005) has noted, the central business of creative economies today is impression management and the production of authenticity.

As a self-made fashion icon, Lau embodies the neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self” (Paul du Gay 1996; Michel Foucault 2008; Gordon 1991; Aihwa Ong 2006) and its ethos of self-responsibility and self-optimization. Her fashion blog, like so many of fashion’s new technologies—with their promise to make shopping better, looking better, and feeling better easier for more people, but particularly women who continue to be fashion’s ideal subjects—enable and encourage the gendered labors of caring and managing one’s self and image. Fashion’s technologies produce a neoliberal subject who, in Ong’s words, is “not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself or herself’” (Ong 2006, p. 14).

The economic/entrepreneurial logics of fashion blogging is embedded in the architecture of the blog itself. Blogs are time- and/or date-stamped, ordered in reverse chronological order, and published on a non-regular schedule, naturalizing the capitalist ethos of the New. Some blogs carefully record time to the second (measured by the local time of the blogger’s computer which may differ from the local time of the reader’s geographic location), while others are less specific. Precise or general, the blog’s temporal structures naturalize and secure industrial age valuations of productivity, punctuality, and accumulation (of symbolic, cultural, and material capital) that are necessary to reproduce capitalism even in the digital age.

Thus, although the fashion blog is an ephemeral form—updated at non-regular schedules and without necessary associations of content or form between posts—the timestamp evinces that even the ephemeral has an internal logic and history. Structuring the blog’s digital temporality is a capitalist ethic wherein exact accounts of time are highly valued as a disciplined and disciplining code of gendered conduct. Bloggers have internalized this ethic and Lau is no exception (Susanna Lau 2009). Popular fashion bloggers, in particular, are pushed to post frequently because their productivity must keep pace with the accelerated rhythms of the fashion system organized around and driven by the economic and cultural logic of the New/Now. Fashion blogs manifest the acceleration of fashion’s capitalist logic. The most popular blogs diligently post the blogger’s own daily (and sometimes bi- and tri-daily) outfits or the on-trend street fashions of others; similarly, the most popular fashion blogs document of-the-moment fashions and styles often *before* they are available to the retail public. Lau’s “success” then rests on her embodiment of a disciplined and disciplining code of gendered conduct.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this discussion by considering the cost of “success,” in particular, the enabling and disabling effects of the concomitant feminization of labor and the racialization of creative laborers in the postmillennial digital economy. On the one hand, these distinct but overlapping cultural economic trends make possible new configurations of fashionable personhood that disrupt historical relations between Western fashion and Asian bodies and aesthetics that, as so many have observed, are structured by hegemonic discourses of race and Orientalism (Dorinne Kondo 1997; Sunaina Maira 2000; Minh-Ha T. Pham 2011; Nirmal Puwar 2002; Nirmal Puwar & Nandi Bhatia 2003; Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu 2011; Peter Wollen 1987). The digital success—indeed *stardom*—Susie Bubble embodies as both creative laborer and fashion expert signals an important intervention in this history. If industrial representations of

Asian women in relation to fashion rendered them as pre-modern “spectacles of both exotic desire and passivity,” in Nirmal Puwar’s terms, digital culture offers a strikingly different image: the Asian feminine body as fashion-forward (2003, p. 259).

Of course, fashion’s Orientalist structures of representation have not completely eroded. Recall Karl Lagerfeld’s 2009 yellowface fashion film and Christian Dior’s Shanghai Dreamers campaign in 2010, aptly described by Jenny Zhang (2010) as “a series of photos where a strikingly-styled white model clad in Dior couture towers over rows of digitally reproduced Chinese women and men dressed in cultural revolution drag.” Nonetheless, the shifting labor and consumer market structures clear important cultural political space for renewed and substantially broadened struggles over the meanings and possibilities of modern personhood.

Nonetheless, the new cultural configuration of the digital economy also disenables the possibilities for social change in that it interpellates subjects into normative neoliberal logics of self-fashioning. As a result of the aestheticization of everyday life in post-traditional societies (see Jean Baudrillard 1983; Mike Featherstone 1991; Frederic Jameson 1991), identity is now a never-ending consumerist project of self-fashioning in which individual consumer choices (with regard to clothes, music, furniture, food, etc.) affirm their personal, social, and civic identities to themselves and to others. Fashion’s new digital technologies—though they may in some contexts enable and enact new configurations of fashionable personhood—can also instrumentalize gendered neoliberal self-making projects. The social, political, cultural, and economic imperatives of self-fashioning produce a new class of “cultural intermediaries” (Pierre Bourdieu 1984)—fashion bloggers, not least among them—that serve implicitly or explicitly as models for better living through consumer culture. In this way, Asian fashion bloggers reinforce rather than disrupt hegemonic formations of subjectivity.

The incorporation of the neoliberal ethos of individualism with consumer models of feminism exerts old and new gendered social pressures. Along with the pressure to care for and manage one’s body and image—a highly gendered if increasingly universal expectation—the feminization of labor and the racialization of the creative laborer/consumer in the postmillennial economy implicitly charges Asian girls and women with the responsibility of the global economy. It is the Chinese (and tacitly, female) luxury fashion consumer that *The New York Times* cites as “the rest of the world’s . . . best hopes for future economic growth” (Leonhardt 2010, p. 56). Yet, as Harris reminds, “the idea that ‘girls can do anything’” too often collides with “the reality of not enough of the good jobs to go around” (Harris 2003, p. 43).

Andrew Ross (2009) has described the new creative/information economy as a “jackpot economy” in which model workers are “self directed, entrepreneurial, [and] accustomed to precarious, nonstandard employment”—all in the hopes of “producing career hits” (2009, p. 10). As with any jackpot, the “glittering prizes” as he calls them, will be won only by “the lucky few” (2009, p. 10). The new creative economy and the Web 2.0 technologies through which it operates promise flexibility and freedom for its largely female workforce and yet the prospect of the jackpot (digital stardom) also digs them deeper into an inherently asymmetrical economy. In the specific context of the contemporary fashion media complex, we see this dialectic of autonomy and dependency in the promise of digital democratization (“the average person [can take] ownership of [fashion]”) and the reality of uneven distributions of power and privilege. As the rhetoric of democratization moves into commonsense logic, the failure to realize the “career hits”

imagined to be available to anyone are internalized as personal failures. Even stars like Lau are not immune to these bad feelings.¹³ Ironically, though success in the post millennium may be increasingly self-made it is also bound ever more to market-recognition. To understand success as an historical formation rather than a personal attribute, as I hope I've demonstrated, is to disentangle its meaningfulness from its market value.

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NOTES

1. The results for the monthly page views of all blogs, unless otherwise noted, were determined by the online tracking system Google Ad Planner on 12 November, 2010.
2. The break-up of AT&T in January 1982 is a watershed event in the modern history of communications technology. While the antitrust ruling against AT&T compelled the communications giant to divest twenty-two of its smaller Bell Operating companies, the divestiture enabled AT&T to get out of the less profitable basic local telephone service business and into the more lucrative markets of information technology. This ultimately reflected the prevailing business philosophy in the 1980s which, as Robert Britt Horwitz notes, shifted "from the traditional 'universal service in the public interest' to a plea to be rid of barriers to diversification" (1989, p. 242). As the AT&T decision spurred politicians and lobbyists to advocate for new communications legislation—the realization of which came in 1996 in the form of the Telecommunications Act signed by Bill Clinton—the discursive convergence of free trade and free speech philosophies became cultural commonsense. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of "the marketplace of ideas" circulated widely in US public discourse. John Durham Peters (2004) provides a useful history of this concept.
3. Even when a non-English language is used, normative linguistic network structures, such as the standard ASCII system (the American Standard Code for Information Interchange) and the popular language of Internet slang, Anglicize non-English communications by removing diacritics or incorporating American English-based netspeak idioms (e.g. LOL, WTF, and OMG).
4. These numbers, it should be noted, do not account for the numerous fashion blog posts scattered in other kinds of blogs. For example, the political/news blog *The Huffington Post* and the celebrity culture/gossip blog *Jezebel.com* post frequently about fashion. And *Mashable!* has more than 1.5 million posts tagged with the keyword fashion (according to a search I just ran on its website) including "9 Fantastic Facebook Pages for Fashion"; "25 + Sites for the Fashion Minded"; and "How to Score the Best Fashion Deals on the Social Web". Some of these posts are retweeted more than two thousand times and shared more than five hundred times on Facebook. If fashion blogs are not a dominant blog category, fashion blogging is certainly a prevailing digital practice generating, at breakneck speeds and unprecedented frequency, countless web streams of popular knowledge (and non-material goods) everyday.

5. Fashion’s democratization has historically been characterized by ordinary people’s increased access to fashion commodities rather than a transformation in the hegemonic structures of fashion. Aesthetic, social, and moral regimes of taste, quality, and innovation serve to maintain and secure classed hierarchies of consumption even as the breathless rhetoric of populism attempted to gloss over them. For a more extensive discussion of the democratization of fashion, see Pham (2011).
6. For a more detailed discussion of cheap chic fashion, see Pham (2011).
7. This is the title of the talk Suzy Menkes gave at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco on 6 May, 2010.
8. According to an August 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project report, 66 percent of American households have high-speed Internet; this is up from 63 percent in 2009. Globally, the US ranks fifteenth among nations with the highest broadband penetration with South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan taking the top three slots (see CISCO 2010; Pew Internet & American Life Project 2010).
9. The social media expertise of fashion bloggers is recognized across non-fashion digital environments as well. In July 2010, Google tapped fashion bloggers to help them understand how new media is being consumed and used (see Sherman 2010).
10. For a critique of Lagerfeld’s fashion film, see Minh-Ha T. Pham (2009).
11. The feminization of labor has also required men to become experts at historically feminine practices of self-care and image-management; some like street style blogger Tommy Ton (based in Canada) and fashion blogger BryanBoy (based in the Philippines) are standouts in the contemporary fashion media complex.
12. See “She’s bubblicious,” on the *Tales of Endearment* website. Available at: <http://talesofendearment.com/?p=149>.
13. For more on the affective dimension of the new digital work order, see Pham (n.d., unpublished manuscript).

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