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THE BRAND SLUTS

Many Who Covet Their Retailers' Garb No Longer Look At The Logo

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It's an impulse as old as the first upright-walking man. Envy. From that caveman admiring (and coveting) that particularly fetching bone decoration on a fellow caveman to today's fashionistas agonizing over someone else's newer Dior bag, envy has shaped our lives.

We are, almost without apology, acquisitive people. We live in a culture that embraces everything new and entices us to throw away something perfectly good and functional for the new model on the showroom floor. We want that next hot cellphone, that faster car, that more tricked-out music device, that flashier kitchen gadget, that more expensive pair of jeans. Consumer envy has made us perfect, and perfectly conspicuous, little shoppers.

And nowhere is consumer envy played out with greater glee and ferocity than in the worlds of beauty and fashion. Countless magazines and endless advertising campaigns convince us to get that new blush, encourage us to spend the equivalent of a round-trip ticket to Los Angeles on a pair of pumps.

From this consumerism emerged a new retail animal in the '80s and '90s: the logo queen. She was obsessed only with polo ponies and interlocked C's. She was loyal to her logos.

Today, that creature has morphed into something that goes by the unflattering name "brand slut" (the nicer term is "brand promiscuous"). She would be the fashion and beauty consumer who flits from one brand to the next. According to trend spotter Marian Salzman, co-author of "Next Now: Trends for the Future,"

"brand slut" is one of the seven phrases that will shape our lives in 2007.

The brand slut, Salzman said, is a growing retail phenomenon that is contributing to the way we shop and the way brands are marketed to us. "Long, monogamous relationships" with particular brands are dying; consumers with no sense of fidelity are on the rise, she said.

"It's a true trend that has been coming for a few years—no loyalty to the brand," said Salzman, executive vice president and chief marketing office for JWT Worldwide.

Marketers have worked for years to keep shoppers faithful to a particular brand, especially in the realm of beauty. But overall brand loyalty is on the decline while brand promiscuity is the new trend, according to a research study for Allure magazine. "Over the past three years, the number of women who say that 'the brand name of the manufacturer' is 'very influential' in their decision to buy a beauty product has decreased by 21 percentage points to its current 19 percent," the report stated.

The Allure report confirms what brand experts have been seeing for years: brand promiscuity. "It used to be that a label whore was consumed by the label and wouldn't be caught dead without it. If you said to them, 'That's a great jacket,' they couldn't just say 'thank you.' They had to say, 'Thank you, it's Prada,'" said Michael Carl, fashion director for Allure. "But what we're seeing now is that's toned down a bit. The consumer is more demanding and wants to be different. It used to be about everyone being the same, but when it comes to clothes, they're looking for one-of-a-kinds and the new and exciting things."

Individualism, antithetical to the brand-allegiant, is key. "Not for nothing, I think today's consumers are a lot smarter than they used to be," Carl said.

Salzman agrees. Brand sluts, she said, are savvy consumers. "They're proud of it because they see it as showing their intelligence," she said. "They're not apologetic about being brand slutty. They're saying, 'I'm consumer, hear me roar.'"

And the roaring consumer is the smart consumer. Today's brand sluts are marked by their "insider" knowledge of the marketplace, said David Wolfe, creative director and fashion trend analyst for the Doneger Group.

"When you think that the real purpose of brand loyalty was developed to help the shopper who didn't know what was what and needed guidance in selecting merchandise from the crowded retail landscape, you realize that that *raison d'être* doesn't exist anymore," he said. "Most shoppers are very, very savvy. They recognize what is good, what's bad, what's trendy or not, and therefore the old brand loyalty is no longer a shopping 'guide.'"

Brand loyalty is now being replaced by brand trust. Brands still matter, but only when they promise to do what they say they will (beauty serums and cosmetics) or when they fit like they're supposed to (clothing lines whose cut fits specific body types).

It's a brave new retail world with all of those brand sluts and brand trusters out there.

"The shopper is out there discovering new things, but there's always going to be brand trust," Carl said. "She's always going to stick with the brands she knows and trusts, but she's also going to try the new thing."