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Teenage Shoppers (Purses by Brinks)

By RUTH LA FERLA

I OWN a Prada messenger bag, I have two Kate Spades, a Gucci belt and a Prada belt, and several pairs of Sisley jeans. I have a lot of Clinique makeup, Bobbi Brown eyeliner, MAC lip gloss and Angel perfume -- that's by Thierry Mugler."

Christina Shepp, 18, was reeling off her recent acquisitions with the crisp precision of a schoolgirl reciting her catechism. Purchased on the \$600 a week she earned last year as a lifeguard at the Roslyn Country Club on Long Island, where she lives, those trophies throng her closet and crowd her dressing table.

Though she is lately inclined to save for college, Ms. Shepp still dreams of buying a Prada nylon slicker. At \$2,000, this might be, she acknowledged with a sigh, a bit rich for her budget.

Like many of her contemporaries across the country, Ms. Shepp is a teenager besotted with fashion, and, not less, with fashion's most opulent brands. Rarely content with a knockoff version, she and her peers comb the malls and congregate on Madison Avenue, often with their mothers in tow, intent on bagging the latest Gucci, Versace or Helmut Lang, even if the object of their lust takes the form of a token lip gloss or cosmetic bag.

Armed with unprecedented personal incomes and a precocious knowledge of what women a decade older consider chic, the upward-striving teenager is now more than ever the target of luxury marketers who once focused strictly on adults. Chanel, Ralph Lauren, Lancome and Versace are just a few of those making a play for the teenage market. So is Bobbi Brown, the makeup artist behind an upscale department store line, whose recent volume of makeup tips, "Bobbi Brown Teenage Beauty" (HarperCollins), spent six weeks on The New York Times list of best-selling children's books.

"I was astonished by these girls' level of sophistication," said Richard Beckman, publisher of the new Teen Vogue, recalling focus groups convened when the magazine, a Vogue spinoff, was planned. "They have great taste and an enormous information base," he added. "They are so much more brand savvy than we ever were at that age."

Teen Vogue, which is being mailed free to Vogue's 650,000 subscribers with the October issue and will be sold separately on newsstands beginning next week, presents high school girls with such timely and coveted grown-up looks as low-slung Katayone Adeli pants and fur tippetts tied around the neck, in the style of Miuccia Prada's Milan catwalk show. The layouts are shot by top-of-the-line photographers like Arthur Elgort and Herb Ritts. Designer apparel, at \$400 and up, is shown alongside less expensive look-alikes.

Advertisers in the first issue (a low-risk business venture for Vogue's owner, Conde Nast, which will decide whether to make Teen Vogue a stand-alone title depending on the response to it) include prestige cosmetics brands like Lancome and Chanel, along with secondary lines of high-fashion designers -- Versus from Versace, DKNY from Donna Karan and Ralph from Ralph Lauren. Clearly, those luxury designers are cultivating the next wave of customers, many of whom already indulge themselves with status handbags and shoes.

"There's a huge lust for designer accessories among teenage girls," said Amy Astley, editor of Teen Vogue.

More traditional girls' magazines are racing to exploit the new generation's penchant for living large, a message imbibed everywhere from music videos to style channels on television to affluent parents. Seventeen magazine is mailing a 32-page supplement with its October issue called On the Edge, which highlights vanguard trends and merchandise rarely showcased in the parent publication. Among them: a racy vinyl slicker and matching skirt by D&G and hip-again Burberry plaids.

YM magazine, whose coverage has conformed to the staples of girls' magazines -- boys, hair, acne -- hired a new editor in chief, Annemarie Iverson, formerly of Harper's Bazaar, to give a sophisticated facelift.

"We are definitely planning an upscale position," said Laura McEwan, YM's publisher. "Beginning next year every page in the magazine will reflect that in the photography, the writing and the design." Of the millions of American girls, she said, "you could assume that a third of that market would be receptive to the messages of upscale marketers."

Fashion and beauty companies, like all marketers, know well that the Census Bureau expects the teenage population to grow to 30 million in 2010, up from 24.6 million in 1990, with the most rapid growth over the next five years. It is a teenage generation with greater spending power than any before it. Lester Rand, president of the Rand Youth Poll, reports that the average income of girls 16 to 19 was \$131 a week last year, up from \$103 in 1997. Among those older teenagers, 8 percent spent more than \$200 a week on clothes, he said.

"Kids today are so self-assured," said Jane Rinzler Buckingham, who heads Youth Intelligence, a trend-spotting firm. They also tend to make buying decisions on their own. "It's no longer a question of 'Please, Mom, can I have this?' but 'I really want this, and I'll earn the money to get it,'" she said.

Fashion and cosmetics makers have grown increasingly inventive in promoting products to the young. Ralph Lauren announced in press material accompanying his first fragrance for teenage girls, Ralph, introduced this season, that he had been influenced by his daughter, Dylan. The scent comes across as a sweet-saucy blend of bubble gum and tea.

Chanel invites teenagers to create and name new nail lacquers, and to enter the company's model-of-the-year contest, sponsored with Seventeen magazine. Now in its fourth year, the contest draws 16,000 applicants. "The Chanel strategy is truly an investment in the future," said Jean Zimmerman, Chanel's director of marketing.

Teen Vogue, despite fashion layouts that seem scarcely different from an adult magazine's, says it is

aiming for the youngest teenagers, 12 to 16. Its inspiration, said Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of Vogue, was her own daughter, Bea, an eighth grader at the Spence School.

"This is a huge market, but having a daughter who's just entered her teens brought it home to me in a very real way," Ms. Wintour said. "Through her I see how interested girls are in fashion, how they follow what the celebrities are wearing. These things were a very huge wake-up call for me."

But the magazine might be in for a tough sell. According to Mr. Rand, younger teenage girls have less spending power than their big sisters: only \$69 a week, about \$19 of which they devote to clothes. Ms. Wintour responded: "That's pocket change. Their parents are still obviously buying them clothes, too."

She said the the magazine is trying to keep most items featured editorially below \$200, "but we are trying to build an awareness of upscale brands."

It is an axiom of fashion magazines that they are "aspirational," encouraging readers to dream about products and a life they cannot afford, but hope to one day. "But they shouldn't be so aspirational that they leave people out in the cold," warned Irma Zandl, the president of the Zandl Group, a New York-based youth-marketing firm.

Marina Albright, 17, a senior at Columbia Preparatory School on Manhattan's Upper West Side, whose tastes long ago graduated from Old Navy, would seem to be the ideal target of the new marketers.

"I like Prada Sport, Helmut Lang, Kenneth Cole and Katayone Adeli," she said, rattling off the names like a fashion editor. "Chanel sunglasses are nice, but the clothes are way too sophisticated. What I really want this year is a Prada bowling bag: that bag is hot."

Such avid and guilt-free consumption comes in part as a reaction to the piety of the early 1990's, when rampant spending was equated with moral lassitude. And it is tacitly encouraged by affluent parents, many of whom themselves are chasing fashion, never mind the cost.

But high-end labels with stratospheric prices are by no means everybody's grail. "I'm concerned -- no, I'm really alarmed -- by the way my daughters pursue style," said Cher Lewis, a Manhattan mother of two teenagers.

"When I was their age, there were only a couple of labels we all had to have -- Pappagallo and Ladybug," Ms. Lewis, a fund-raiser for nonprofit organizations, added. "But my mother wouldn't think of buying any of those things for us. They were just too expensive."

Thomasin Shepp took pains to point out that her daughter, Christina, buys her clothes mostly with her own earnings. "My daughter has three stacks of cashmere sweaters, each 12 inches high," she said with a mix of pride and consternation. "And that's very modest compared with her friends."

Photos: An upscale face-lift is in the works at YM magazine.; Teen Vogue is hoping to lure readers 12 to 16 with looks that are fresh off the Milan and New York catwalks.; Marina Albright with Katayone Adeli jeans, Prada sandals and bag and a Susan Lazar sweater. (David Corio for The New York

Times)(pg. 1); Bobbi Brown in her office with her new book. (Christopher Smith for The New York Times)(pg. 10)