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What is This?
Marketing Consumption

Fashion modeling work in contemporary society

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Abstract
Fashion and branding have become powerful forces in the contemporary world. Fashion models, central players in these developments, are both lightning rods for controversy and objects of desire. To avoid the kinds of polarizing or sensationalist views of modeling that are common in academic and popular circles, this article focuses on modeling as work, to explore what models do when they fascinate or repel us via their engagement in commodification and branding processes that promote consumption. Using data from interviews with fashion models and those who work with them, the article argues that models promote consumption in far more complex ways than merely smiling for the camera. The article considers models as cultural intermediaries, discussing how they frame consumer experiences and encounters with commodities in the selection, styling and dissemination of images populated by models. Viewing models' self-commodification as forms of aesthetic, entrepreneurial, and immaterial labor, the article illustrates how these practices of compulsory image management and socializing glamorize the model 'life' and so play into processes used to brand and sell urban space. Placing these activities in the context of new branding practices, the article concludes with a discussion of how the model life and the experience of being 'in fashion' are being packaged and sold as a commodity in and of itself. By working hard to produce the image of living the 'model life', workers in this industry model a lifestyle that is then packaged and sold to consumers as an experience that can be had for the price of their attention.

Key words
aesthetic labor ● branding ● commodification ● cultural intermediaries ● entrepreneurial labor ● fashion ● immaterial labor ● image production ● models (persons)
FASHION AND BRANDING have become powerful forces in the contemporary world. Yet thinking about fashion models, workers at the forefront of these forces, has been quite polarized. Either they are enforcers of oppressive body styles (as exemplified by Susan Bordo’s (1993) work, or that of Jean Kilbourne (1999)); are condemned for leading a dangerously hedonistic lifestyle (most recently incarnated by the supermodel Kate Moss, a video of whom snorting a white powder caused an international media storm); or seen as icons of femininity (see, for example, Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999). Even social histories such as Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women (Gross, 1995), and Catwalking: A History of the Fashion Model (Quick, 1997), have been quite sensational in tone. This interest has been met, in recent years, however, by growing scholarly interest (Entwistle, 2002, 2004; Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006, and forthcoming; Evans, 2001; Maynard, 1999; Mears and Finlay, 2005; Neff et al., 2005; Soley Beltran, 2004; Wissinger, 2007; Parmentier and Fischer, 2007). Seeking to avoid polarizing or sensationalist views, this article focuses on modeling as work, to explore what models do when they fascinate or repel us via their engagement in commodification and branding processes that promote consumption.

The model’s role in commodification and branding is multi-faceted. Most obviously, models lend their image to sell products, incorporating their likeness into the image of a brand. This is an evident feature of the work, and in this respect the modeling industry fuels the desire central to modern consumption in two ways: as an industry it provides the labor force for many clients – big business, fashion houses, advertising agencies, etc. – selling goods; it also is centrally important in the experience of being a consumer – by framing consumer experiences and encounters with commodities. In other words, models and model agencies are intermediaries between production and consumption, since our encounters with commodities are heavily mediated by the way they are sold to us through the selection, styling and dissemination of images populated by models. Models also, however, engage in subtle forms of commodifying themselves, to create an image that will sell on the model market. In so doing, they work to appear as if they live ‘the life’ (Parmentier and Fischer, 2007: 23), grooming to produce a fashionable ‘look’, wearing the most fashionable clothes, going to the most fashionable parties. If they are successful, as in the case of the ‘supermodels’, they may no longer have to act ‘as if’ – they will be given the designer clothes, be ferried to parties in limousines and call the shots in their own career. This compulsory self-commodification takes the form of aesthetic, entrepreneurial and immaterial labor that has the side-effect of promoting a lifestyle and a particular pattern of consumption.
in which being in the know, or part of ‘fashion’, becomes a good in and of itself.

Thus, while at first glance models seem involved only in selling the products they model, they also engage in consumption practices that build their image, and in so doing, they mediate our experiences of commodities, and commodify the experience of being ‘in fashion’. These practices involve both aesthetic labor, in which workers must invest in styling their bodies and personalities in order to get and keep work (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), and entrepreneurial labor, in which workers invest time, energy and funds to foster professional relationships, and build their productive capacity, in return for uncertain rewards (Neff et al., 2005).

The way those in the modeling industry engage in this ‘schmoozing’ and ‘makeover’ culture in order to attract and keep paid employment also plays into processes used to brand and sell urban space. When models go out in the latest styles to the hottest nightspots, to project the message of living a lifestyle that fits the image of being a model in order to secure work, these compulsory socializing practices provide fodder for urban venues seeking to up their ‘cool’ quotient, and thereby augment the value of their brand. Urban nightspots seek to attract those who go out on the ‘scene’, socializing that is very much part of modeling work, to capitalize on what seems to be a free association of creative and glamorous people, but in reality is an intensely networked realm of production.

In other words, by engaging in the sorts of compulsory socializing that modeling calls for, models ‘model’ a lifestyle that enables ‘social interaction and communication’ to enter the system of production as ‘directly productive elements’ (Arvidsson, 2005: 237), in which the product is typically an experience, mood or feeling. This compulsory image management and socializing glamorizes the ‘model life’, an activity that arguably represents immaterial labor, since it facilitates the creation of what Arvidsson calls a ‘social context of production’ (2005: 241).

Thus, Part I of this article examines how models and model agencies are intermediaries between production and consumption, since our encounters with commodities are heavily mediated by the way these are sold to us through the selection, styling and dissemination of images populated by models. Part II considers how models become commodities themselves, insofar as they embody an image that is bought and sold. From this perspective, the question of consumption is seen in terms of image production; that is, how does a model’s purchase of beauty services, or luxury goods, contribute to the production of the model’s image, i.e. the appropriate self and identity that can be sold in the market for fashion models?
Part III looks at how the structure of the modeling industry, calling as it does on models’ and other workers in the industry’s entrepreneurial labor, depends on socializing and consumption of nightlife ‘scenes’ as a node of production. Part IV examines how this structure of production in the modeling industry is used in a complex way (by brand managers, for instance) to promote consumption through associating products with modeling, a practice that feeds into a trend toward packaging and selling the experience of being ‘in fashion’ as a commodity in and of itself.

This article is based on data from the fashion modeling industry in New York. The data is taken from a larger study (Wissinger, forthcoming), for which I interviewed 34 models (26 female and eight male), 12 modeling agents (or ‘bookers’ as they are known in the industry), two photographers, two advertising executives, three art directors, two PR agents, one casting agent, one makeup artist and one production assistant, 58 interviews in total. My working definition of ‘fashion model’ is someone whose job entails posing for photographs and traveling the circuit of designer shows to walk fashion runways. The models in this study who are not fashion models are either older workers (25 years or older), employed by commercial print and television advertising; or they are fit models, whose bodies are used to fit prototypes of clothes prior to manufacturing. While different types of models were interviewed, the majority in the sample are models who make or did make a living from modeling.1

Contacts were made using a snowball sample, and were conducted between 1999 and 2006. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions in order to stimulate a longer discussion, such as how they got into the profession, how they defined their job, what they felt they needed to do on the job, and to relate their experiences of different aspects of the work, in terms of how commercial or mainstream jobs differed from editorial or cutting-edge work, how print differed from runway, and what models have to do in order to get jobs. Interviews were open-ended and unstructured, lasting from one to two hours. The age range for the sample was from 16 to 28 years old for the models, with one older, semi-retired male model in his early 40s; the bookers tended to be slightly older, mostly in their 30s and 40s. The ethnicity of the sample was predominantly white and of European origin. Both of these facts speak to the youthful composition of fashion more generally, and also to the persistently white bias in fashion modeling, where only recently has it been possible for Black, Asian or other non-white European models to capture the kinds of campaigns and other contracts sought after in modeling (for a more in-depth treatment of this issue, see Wissinger, in press).
While there were about the same number of male and female models in the sample, it should be noted that there are fewer jobs available to male models, and they earn significantly less than their female counterparts. As Joanne Enwistle has pointed out in her study of male models in the ‘aesthetic economy’ of modeling, this may be due in part to the ‘different political economies of male and female modeling’, in which big cosmetics contracts and designer campaigns are more readily available to female models, and the overall market for women’s fashions is much larger than men’s (Entwistle, 2002: 320). The higher value of women’s ‘beauty’ and intense scrutiny aimed at female bodily appearance that many feminists have pointed out may also be a factor (Entwistle, 2002: 320). In addition, model managers may also accept lower wages for male models because they don’t take male models as seriously, claiming they are ‘just in it for the girls’, or that men model to feed their own vanity (Mears, 2007). Despite these differences, both male and female models experience demands exacted by the modeling world in a manner that I shall now describe.

PART I: MODELS AS INTERMEDIARIES
Modeling work is inextricably linked to the development of modern consumer culture: as markets opened up and commodities became more widely available over the post-war period, these developments have been met with an expansion in the modeling industry, with more models required to render these things desirable. The number of modeling agencies has grown every year, since the first firm was incorporated in the 1920s. The number of agencies listed in the Manhattan Yellow Pages increased from 8 to 143 between 1935 and 2002. The 2008–09 Occupational Outlook Handbook (Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, 2008–09) said that in 2006, models held about 2,000 jobs; the profession is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2016. The role modeling played in the post-Second World War boom, in which newly available glossy magazines put slick advertising images into the hands of targeted consumers, was significant. The glamorous images found in Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, Life and Look magazines showed the way toward the commodification of more and more realms of contemporary life, seducing the public into believing that hope could perhaps be found in a jar, and true love and happiness might be possible if one just made the right purchases.

Insofar as they provide a labor force for constructing the iconography of desire, Joanne Entwistle and I have proposed elsewhere that one way to think about models may be borrowed, loosely, from Bourdieu’s idea of ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2007). Bourdieu initially
used this term in *Distinction* (1984) as part of a more general discussion of the supposed expansion of the petit bourgeoisie, to include such occupations as journalist-writers and writer-journalists and the ‘producers of cultural programmes on television or radio’. In his later work on fields of cultural production, he expanded this term to enable him to talk about a range of occupations involved in the *symbolic production* of meaning around things such as art and popular culture. These occupations are involved in taste-making or defining, shaping the ways in which we encounter and make sense of cultural artefacts in their work of mediation. According to Bourdieu, understanding the production of the things we consume as ‘culture’ requires understanding the production of symbolic meanings around goods: these goods are shaped and styled for our consumption by a host of occupations, some of which Bourdieu himself discusses, such as fashion journalists, art and literary agents, for example. Taking their cue from this, recent work from Crewe (2003), Gough-Yates (2003), McFall (2004), Negus (1992, 1999) and Nixon and Du Gay (2002) extends the term cultural intermediaries to describe the work of a variety of other occupations – advertising creatives and account managers, men’s and women’s magazine editors, and music producers and A&R (Artists and Repertoire) executives. These agents are responsible for translating goods into commodities, moving between the two realms of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’, and therefore are responsible for framing or promoting culture within the capitalist marketplace (Entwistle, 2009).

It may be rather provocative to describe models as cultural mediators, as one might argue that they are not the authors of symbolic meanings – shaped as they are by the clients they work for and the creative directives of people who style and photograph them. However, there are a few ways in which one can see models performing some of the work of mediation. Bourdieu’s later use of the term is suitably vague to enable their inclusion: some models can become self-styled agents of their own symbolic meaning, although here we refer to the very small number of models, the so-called ‘supermodels’ who have reached the pinnacle of the industry, and so gain a level of control over their image, an autonomy aspired to by models on the lower echelons (Entwistle, 2009).

Kate Moss, for example, has succeeded in mediating between producers and consumers: long before she was asked to design a range for Top Shop, Moss was renowned for selling styles in volume. If she was caught by the paparazzi in a Top Shop t-shirt, it was guaranteed to walk out of the stores thereafter. Reportedly, she noticed her ‘ability to create fashion’ when she ‘would see things that I wore sometimes that designers had
copied...so I thought, listen, I could do that’ (Sykes, 2008: 183). Part of the reasoning behind her contract to design for Top Shop comes from precisely this power and influence to shape tastes and sell commodities, not in a formalized fashion campaign or contract, but as an embodied agent of ‘style’.

Moss’s path to supermodel-dom and arbiter of style is comprised of a complex amalgamation of her appearance, her agency’s reputation, the frequency and type of photographs she appeared in, the fashion shows she has done, whether or not she does commercials, and where and when she has been seen around town. Most models who reach superstardom have collaborated with an agent or photographer who helps them shape their image. In Moss’s case, her image was created in collaboration with photographer Corrine Day, with whom, according to Day’s website, she formed a ‘long and close relationship’ (2007).

Given the history of its formation, it is tempting to see the development of Moss’s influential style as the result of shaping by industry experts, but in fact, the relationship between model and mentor is more complex. Models, especially those just starting out, receive guidance about what to wear, how to look, where and with whom to go out. Yet, the onus of the burden is on the model’s shoulders to appear as if they just ‘are’ stylish or glamorous, that they naturally embody the kind of careless glamour fashion images so often project. Instruction and guidance can only go so far. If the model does not bring something of their own flair to the transaction, they will not amount to much in the industry. Comments from an agent at an exclusive ‘boutique’ agency that manages only a small number of high calibre models, highlight the contradiction between the image of the model as totally controlled and their apparent independence when they reach a certain level, a contradiction that implies at least some models may have more to do with their own success than initially appears to be the case. For models starting out, the agent usually claims to control all decisions regarding her image, as this agent points out:

It’s 98 percent the manager and 2 percent the model. We will tell them how to dress for a certain appointment. We tell them how to react to a certain client, how to...what parties to go to, where to be seen, what restaurants to hang out at, or I mean everything from where they get their facials to what airlines they fly.

Yet, for models who make it to the top, it is a completely different game. At this point:
Once she’s made, once she’s Claudia Schiffer, or Christy Turlington, then she’s on her own, well not on her own, but she’s involved in every single decision that’s made. Once she reaches that level – you manage yourself with your manager. Every single move is made with your manager. You’re not being told what you’re doing, you’re making your decisions.

At the same time as she explained the extent to which the manager controls models just starting out, she conceded that only those models that can ‘handle it’ are sent on appointments to see high calibre photographers such as Steven Meisel. In other words, while it may be the case that, to win bookings with photographers and clients at this level, all of the ‘little nuances’ matter and the amount of ‘marketing and image’ involved is very high, requiring that inexperienced girls be managed quite closely for these encounters. At the same time, however, the manager cannot do it alone. Part of the manager’s job is to bring out whatever potential the model may have to inspire what this agent referred to as the ‘very small tiny little community of editorial clients’, made up of the photographers, designers and editors who can make a model’s career. From this perspective, then, it was not only Kate Moss’s savvy management, for example, but also her ‘cheeky attitude’ (Sykes, 2008:183) and development of a trademark ‘hi-lo style’ (2008: 182), that helped catapult her to the top, and into the role of fashion icon.

For models who have not reached the status of supermodel, their agency in the process of selling things is more diffuse. It exists within a whole host of networks of consumption, and the images models produce and in which they appear help to circulate a whole host of commodities. In other words, models are nodes in the distribution of the symbolic meaning of things: and this can refer to the way they operate as embodied human agents – wearing particular clothes, styling particular looks in their everyday life as captured by the paparazzi, as Moss does so well – and as component parts of the stylized fashion imagery that circulates, although, in reality, the two are very similar: whether we encounter Moss in a paparazzi shot or a fashion campaign, it is always a highly mediated encounter with an image, not the real person.

PART II: THE ALL CONSUMING IMAGE IN MODELING
Part of modeling work is to produce a ‘look’ or ‘image’ that will sell the model to clients. Where and how they shop, eat, get their hair styled, live, vacation and work are all part and parcel of the process by which a model produces his or her image, all consumption practices that are geared toward...
producing the model’s ‘look’ for the marketplace. As the boutique agent quoted above pointed out, even the airlines a model flies affect that image:

Well, yeah, I mean Air France when you are going to Paris, you are going to get better service when you are coming in as a model than if you flew TWA, especially if you are going to Paris.

Whether they are making choices dictated by their management, or they have reached the level of making choices for themselves, it is both through their paid work and through their lifestyle, which includes their style of consumption, that models valorize their image, an image that is constructed on a 24-hour a day basis, making it difficult for models to distinguish between when they are on or off the job. This image is the product clients buy in order to sell their products to consumers, and thinking about modeling in this way conflates the often taken-for-granted distinction between ‘production’ and ‘consumption’, since models’ productive labor is bound up with the ways in which they consume, which in turn produces them as a commodity within the modeling labor market.

Entwistle and I have argued that this work to produce an image may be understood as aesthetic labor (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), which involves the commodification of self for sale in a highly uncertain labor market. Aesthetic labor is the labor that involves acquiring or maintaining a particular bodily performance at work, whether it is a look that is attractive, or certain attitude or ‘professional’ demeanor that enables employees to ‘look good and sound right’ for the job (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001: 2). This kind of labor involves a packaging of the body for consumption, in which a certain image is constructed and put out in the marketplace.

Constructing the right image for the marketplace also involves work to produce an appropriate personality and relationships for work, and thus involves pulling for a model’s entrepreneurial labor as well (Neff, et al., 2005). Models are independent contractors who are employed on a project-by-project basis as part of a team. Freelance workers of this sort engage in entrepreneurial labor when they take the risk of investing large amounts of their time with little promise of a definite pay-out. Therefore, modeling doesn’t just sell commodities; through their aesthetic and entrepreneurial labor, models commodify themselves, producing a self and demeanor that is attractive to hire, and in so doing, help promote the image of a lifestyle, with its own consumption rhythms, which, by virtue of its association with modeling helps make it attractive to consumers more generally.

Both aesthetic and entrepreneurial labor demand that workers be enterprising, that they work to create an image that will sell. Managing one’s
own small enterprise, selling oneself, or taking care of one’s business involves
the aesthetic labor of commodifying one’s appearance, in the form of
personal grooming and creation of a personal ‘style’. It also involves the
entrepreneurial labor of cultivating potentially lucrative relationships,
through engaging in social interaction in the ‘right’ places with the ‘right’
people. This section will treat how models commodify their appearance,
and the next will discuss how models commodify their personalities.

The aesthetic labor of modeling may involve all manner of bodily work –
dieting, working-out, tanning, looking after one’s skin, shaving, waxing,
plucking bodily hair, paying regular trips to the hairdresser, the beauty salon,
the gym. Several models we interviewed explained that the work on the
self never stops. One model pointed out that even when on vacation from
working, she makes sure to take a one to two hour jog every day to ‘keep
things in order.’

In many occupations, aesthetics of the body are important to the labor
process and the circulation of value, both the value of the individual body
selling itself on the labor market and the value of employee bodies sold by
companies to customers. Thus, aesthetics of the body contribute to capital
accumulation in some occupational sectors where the aesthetic body is a
commodity, either because it is important to the service sold, or where the
body’s image is the commodity transacted between employee and client,
which is the case with modeling. In labor markets that demand an aesthetic
body, the onus is on workers to perform the necessary aesthetic labor and
this constitutes an often important part of the production process, while
‘on the job’ as well as ‘behind the scenes’, i.e., in time not officially defined
as ‘work’, such as going to the gym or doing anything required to maintain
one’s body for this work. Thus aesthetic labor involves work on the raw
material of the body – shaping it as best one can to fit in with the
stringent requirements of modeling.

The body is packaged for consumption in various ways. A female model
explains:

You want to sell them because you’re your product; you’re the
product.

[Your appearance?]

Yeah, your appearance, which is different from who you are, it’s
hard to remember that it’s just your exterior.

The model’s image is part of the product that they are. An agent put it
succinctly: ‘the image is the commodity,’ and models must engage in specific
consumption practices in order to create the right image, which they then sell to clients. They work to produce their image through their self presentation, which entails specific modes of consumption: a young female booker has new models look at magazines, and then sends them shopping, so they will be dressed 'right' for clients. They are also sent to an agency-approved salon for a cut and color, and are required to get a manicure, a pedicure and buy makeup. A casting agent noted: ‘Models actually wear the fashions they model – to get the job they have to look like they know about fashion.’ A model who was near the top of the profession for several years remarked:

You have to look a certain level, you have to go shopping (so there are certain rules of appearance in terms of your clothes) . . . it’s hard to describe what professionalism is.

Another linked this attention to appearance to the goal of projecting an image of being in demand, saying, ‘you have to look like you are making money, you must look like you are working.’ She found she had to shop frequently to get the varied and subtle looks called for by the job, and ‘forever’ found herself ‘running into stores at 7am’ on the way to castings to get what she needed to project that image. One model included these demands to look right as part of the job description:

First you have to distinguish what my job entails which is keeping myself in shape, I consider going to the gym as part of my job, going to the manicurist and pedicurist . . .

Thus, activities that are normally coded as leisure pursuits, such as shopping, getting a manicure or getting one’s hair done, are pulled into the productive domain, when they are aimed at creating the model’s ‘look’ for work.

This compulsion to perform aesthetic labor, combined with the imperative to produce one’s image at all times while in public, affects the top models, such as Kate Moss, and regular workaday models alike. For those at the top such as Moss, embodying the image involves dressing the part at all times, which can be difficult. She knows that ‘any pictures of her help promote her own products’, and ‘When I am going out at night, I know I am going to be photographed. But if you’re going on the school run and you have to think about looks for the world’s paparazzi, it’s not so great’ (Sykes, 2008: 185). While this readiness for public scrutiny seems only to be a problem for celebrities, in fact, lesser known models are also called on to live as if they are the image they sell, as this model discovered when she pinned up her new bangs (fringe) for a quick trip to her modeling agency. Her agent came running from across the room yelling at her:
‘Ahhhh! Bangs, bangs!’ gesturing toward his forehead saying, ‘you can’t wear them like that!’ and I was really surprised. He didn’t like it pinned back because it was uncool, it wasn’t stylish. It was so annoying. If they see you in the street, they say ‘you can’t do this! You have to blah blah blah’ you know? Like you are supposed to be on your job 100 percent of the time!

This model was learning that modeling entails not only promoting commodities via paid work but also calls for promoting oneself as a commodity by engaging in practices aimed at producing an image that exemplifies the kind of lifestyle choices models’ paid work promotes. These practices produce the overall image of models and modeling in ways that mediate encounters with commodities outside of the most obvious features of paid modeling work.

Thus, one can think of the influence of models going far beyond their role in selling goods. Models may sell products through stylized fashion imagery they help to create and through their own embodied style outside or beyond this, but their influence and mediating role is greater than simply selling actual goods or services. Complying with the structured demands of the modeling world, they might be said to promote a host of things: aesthetic standards of dress, body and demeanor, a particular ‘lifestyle’, and particular patterns of consumption. Models ‘model’ consumption practices that involve a highly groomed, closely styled image, which is then circulated for sale in the model marketplace. As I argue below, the need to circulate one’s image helps create and sustain a particular urban scene and particular consumption habits focused around bars, restaurants, clubs, and so on. This ‘scene’, in part, makes up the model mystique, an image of a lifestyle that is then packaged and sold in the form of television shows, websites, ringtones and other branded products that consumers use to create a sense of community around the idea of fashion, in a form of pre-programmed agency that is profitable for marketers.

PART III: THE VALUE OF THE SCENE

Models not only package themselves by wearing the right clothes or having the right ‘look’, they also work to present themselves as ‘in the know’ as part of a community, an important player in the field of modeling. Thus models not only ‘model’ consumption practices by engaging in aesthetic labor; the entrepreneurial aspects of their work demand that they ‘model’ forms of nightlife consumption in order to get and keep work. These practices are in turn attractive to venues seeking to capitalize on hype, and all
of these activities taken together promote the image of the industry as a center of glamour and ‘cool’. When models and modeling professionals perform entrepreneurial labor, they invest time and energy socializing with others in the industry with an eye toward making possibly profitable associations through building networks. This unpaid time devoted to getting work takes place within what one freelance fashion editor called the ‘circuit of scenes.’ These scenes are comprised of the many dinners, parties and other social gatherings that are a major part of ‘the life’, as many models refer to it (Fischer and Parmentier, 2007: 23).

In other words, models produce their image not only in the pictures in which they appear, or how they appear in the street, going shopping, or en route to a photo shoot or fashion show, but also via the energy generated in the various social networks that are a key element of production in the industry. This energy, hype or buzz, created when actors in the field congregate, is attractive to urban nightlife venues, which try to exploit the modeling industry’s ‘social scene’ as a means for creating a potentially profitable image for themselves. Further, brands try to associate themselves with this kind of ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001) in hopes that some of the glamour and attractiveness of the ‘scene’ will rub off on their product. Finally, the publicity this lifestyle attracts also serves to enlist consumers in the production of its value, as they engage with the fashionable life as a branded experience, spending their free time watching television shows, building websites and fostering a community along pre-programmed lines that shape and guide their apparently autonomous behavior.

A young model backstage at a New York fashion show was explicit about it: ‘fashion parties are about meeting people, not about having fun.’ Another model at the same show explained ‘I get jobs when I go out into the nightlife. It’s unbelievable who you can meet.’ When she first started, this model went out seven nights a week because she found she made ‘so many connections’, but now, having achieved some measure of success, she is more ‘moderate – I go out about two to three nights per week’. Going out is usually a model’s choice, but a young girl from Slovenia who has been in the industry for about a year said: ‘Sometimes even the bookers tell you, you have to go out, this night, because this photographer might be there. Certain parties at a studio you’ll have to go to, too.’

Although the less experienced models have to be told what to do, one agent found that as a result of this constant networking, successful models develop what she called a ‘sixth sense’ – they begin to get a good idea of ‘who’s who’. A booker tells her models to make it a priority to know all the most important clients, and the best ones do:
These models come in – I have to give them a little credit. They learn very, very fast. They learn within a few months who’s who. They know who the photographers are and they learn how to play the game. They develop a sixth sense of how to be on these appointments and how to react, and how to not be too chatty with their fellow models, and I mean they really get it, they do, they get it, and then when they’ve got a taste of it, they’re just like hungry lions, they just want more and more.

Models and other members of the industry ‘play the game’ on the nightlife scene, engaging in what Elizabeth Currid has called the ‘Economics of a Dance Floor’ (2007: 87), where workers in creative industries ranging from models, to photographers, art directors, designers, and merchandisers meet and inspire one another, and form contacts for potential collaborations, or production teams. Although she does not examine the modeling world in detail, Currid’s claim that ‘social interactions are essential to the overall production system’ (2007: 89) in creative industries is true of modeling as well.

While Currid celebrates this use of urban nightlife spaces by creative people ‘as ways to advance their own careers and the cultural economy more broadly’ (Currid, 2007: 95), she misses how for models, and other aspirants to the ‘hot’ jobs in ‘cool’ industries (Neff et al., 2005), there can be a downside to this form of production. Namely, Currid’s interviews with the highly successful participants in the creative economy underplay what David Grazian has called ‘the darker side of these adventures in compulsory networking and self-promotion,’ given how:

the growing instability of the flexible creative economy requires workers to take on the burdens of entrepreneurial labor (Neff et al., 2005) by shouldering more of the risks and overhead costs of developing artistic careers in the first place. (Grazian, 2008a: 117)

While Currid herself points out that Dior’s fashion designer Hedi Slimane has said he ‘plug[s] into the nightlife scene to become inspired’ for his collections, she fails to acknowledge that the ‘unknown girl on the dance floor’ who sparks his creative process (Currid, 2007: 6) is most likely an aspiring model who goes out night after night in hopes of making a connection that will be her big break. Models spend their time socializing and conducting their lives with an eye toward making potentially lucrative associations with their peers. Using time and energy for work during what is normally coded as leisure time represents an entrepreneurial aspect of
modeling work that is important to consider. While going out every night may seem like mere fun, I am interested in how the willingness to engage with this lifestyle in the pursuit of ‘cool’ feeds into marketing strategies that are capturing social energy for productive ends.

One way to think about this process is to examine how nightlife is made into a workplace in the modeling industry’s ‘circuit of scenes’. Engaging in the ‘scene’ of the modeling world, either by direct participation, or by following it in gossip pages or one’s favorite ‘style’ website, can be understood as a kind of immaterial production. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, in immaterial production, ‘life becomes inseparable from work’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 138), and the ‘reproduction and enrichment of its productive capacities’ becomes an important moment in the production process. Hence, this type of production encompasses a ‘series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work” – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). The fashion crowd, of which models are a part, strive to be the arbiters of taste; they model a form of consumption to which advertisements admonish us to aspire; and when models and their acolytes gather to make the connections which are formative of their ‘productive capacity’, the fashion crowd engages in a ‘series of activities that are not normally recognized as “work”’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 133) such as going to parties, that are nonetheless an integral part of doing business in this industry.2

Adam Arvidsson’s work on brands and immaterial labor is useful here for making a connection between the productive social networks Lazzarato describes and consumption. Arvidsson is interested in exploring:

what many consumer researchers have argued to be the productive aspects of consumption [cf. Firat and Dholakia, 1998], and what some critical theorists have seen as the controlling or even exploitative aspects of brands and of the new ‘means of consumption’ in general [Ritzer, 1999]. (Arvidsson 2005: 237)

Working with ideas from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000), Arvidsson describes how in the ‘post-modern, highly mediatized life world’ we now live in (Arvidsson, 2005: 242), there has been a ‘movement from a Fordist, factory-centered production process to the more diffuse and expanded systems of production that characterize post-Fordism, where social interaction and communication enter as directly productive elements’ (Arvidsson, 2005: 237).
The work models and their associates do to produce the right ‘image’ on the ‘scene’ is one example of this process. This form of immaterial labor takes place when the model or model agent ‘draws on knowledge, contacts, and social relations’ that they mobilize in the ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001) of leisure time (Arvidsson, 2005: 241). By spending their leisure time making connections, the ‘scene’ created by models and their acolytes is productive in two ways. When they get together for professional reasons at a party, the fashion crowd nonetheless enjoys itself and produces a typical output of immaterial labor, for example:

- a social relation, a shared meaning, or a sense of belonging; what Hardt and Negri have more recently called a common, that feeds into the post-Fordist production process by providing a temporary context that makes the production or the realization of value possible. (Arvidsson 2005: 241)

The ‘unpaid social life’ (2005: 241) of the modeling world called for by the entrepreneurial aspects of modeling work creates a ‘context of consumption’, which Arvidsson defines as a ‘social relation within which goods make sense’ (2005: 242). By engaging in practices that create a ‘scene’ that appears glamorous or fashionable and thereby generates publicity, workers in the modeling industry help produce a ‘common framework’ in which goods have value, where getting into the hot nightclub or restaurant, or having the ‘it’ bag or shoes, or reading and blogging about these practices, will be a meaningful experience, creating a sense of belonging, or being part of, a fashionable life. Arguably, organizational structures such as modeling that create frameworks for tapping into the ‘common’ as a source of value, present the possibility for insidious marketing methods in which consumers can be pulled into creating their own market-driven experiences, experiences that promote patterns of consumption that increase the value of brands.

PART IV: GILT BY ASSOCIATION – BRANDING AND THE FASHIONABLE LIFE

Arvidsson claims that new forms of brand management capitalize on the energies and meanings consumers themselves bring to branded experiences. Marketing commodities in this scenario is achieved through a form of ‘biopolitical’ control, a form of governance that ‘works from below by shaping the context in which freedom is exercised, and by providing the raw materials it employs’ (2005: 246). From this perspective, ‘what to do with the object’ (2005: 246) is not spelled out; rather, ‘brands work as platforms for action that enable the production of particular immaterial..."
use-values: an experience, a shared emotion, a sense of community. This way, brands work as a kind of ubiquitous means of production that are inserted within the socialized production process that consumers engage in’ (2005: 248).

In particular, when brand managers use the productive capacity of the social scene in modeling to guide and channel responses to particular products and venues, they are using the ‘scene’ to provide ‘an environment, an ambience, which anticipates and programs the agency of consumers’ (2005: 245). This programming no longer takes the imperative form of ‘You Must!’, but rather functions with the softer suggestion of ‘You May!’ (Arvidsson, 2005, quoting Barry, 2001 and Žižek, 1999: 245). Here, the modeling world is used to produce an ambience for brands, by playing on the layered associations between models and the products their work advertises, the fashionable and attractive ideal they seek to embody, and lifestyle they strive to create the impression of having. By “‘farming out’ the diffusion of a branded good, or the construction of a sign value, to a particularly influential or attractive group’ (Arvidsson 2005: 248), brand managers on some level cede control of how the process will work, and instead trust that the productive social networks that typify this crowd will produce some valuable associations for their brand.

A typical example of the way models are used to ‘farm out’ the construction of a sign value for branded settings or products is the ‘model party’. This term describes a party ostensibly for models and other workers in the industry. ‘Model parties’ are thrown by modeling agencies, photo studios, bars, clubs and restaurants. For these parties, agencies spend money to get their models and potential clients into one place, and the agency and the venue for the party benefit from the kinds of interaction enabled by such a setting. A photographer, for example, may meet the ‘it’ girl or boy, befriend them and so get a chance to photograph him or her. The models, an agent explained, get exposure in the right sort of setting, ‘their names get out there, they make contacts’. If the press comes, ‘all the better’; the agencies’ and the models’ notoriety is built, which produces publicity for all involved.

Clubs and bars want to host these parties to associate themselves with fashion, glamour and beautiful people, an association that might then attract a clientele of a certain caliber. According to a young female booker, ‘model parties’ enhance the bar or club’s image, as well as having an immediate effect on the bottom line, since, in her experience at least:

female models attract men with money, which brings in a higher bar tab. They’ll use any excuse – a model’s birthday, a stupid
holiday . . . Deals go down in bars frequently. . . . Brands of alcohol throw these parties too . . . to get the ‘right’ people there drinking their product to create the right image.

In a recent example of the value of attracting the ‘right’ people to patronize one’s business, a nightclub venue in New York City hired a handsome 21-year-old Englishman as ‘image director’, paying him a weekly stipend to ‘create relationships with agents, designers, model agencies, and with the celebs’. Essentially working as what is known in the business as a ‘model wrangler’, the club will also send him to ‘Milan, Paris, and London during their fashion weeks and to the Cannes Film Festival’, an investment they are making because ‘he could be our connection between the A-list and our venue’, thereby cementing its market value in the currency of image (Salkin, 2008).

This subtle form of branding has the side effect of blurring what is perceived as reality with what David Grazian refers to as the ‘synthetic excitement’ (2008b: 86) generated by the ‘pseudo event’ (2008b: 77) in urban nightlife. Grazian describes the process as ‘reality marketing’ (2008b: 86) in which ‘public relations firms . . . recruit actresses, models, and pop stars to make seemingly casual appearances at their clients’ most fashionable hot spots, for a price’ (2008b: 78), a practice that infuses their ‘branded image with a shot of nocturnal cool’ (2008b: 79) to ‘legimate the venue among an even broader crowd of wannabes and hangers-on while attracting the paparazzi and entertainment news media’ (2008b: 80). A freelance fashion editor I talked to saw this legitimation process as ‘a circuit of “scenes” or power centers; it’s very organic, and sometimes it makes a place or a company’; she cited Balthazar, a hot restaurant in New York at the time, as an example of how becoming popular with the fashion crowd can catapult a restaurant to white hot status. Trying to attract this ‘scene’ sometimes has its drawbacks, however. As Grazian points out, this crowd’s insularity ‘drastically limits’ the ‘ability to reach more heterogeneous, wider webs of consumers who make up the bulk of the city’s nightlife market’ (2008b: 83). When these consumption practices do make it into the public eye, however, they glamorize a lifestyle, making it attractive in ways that influence far more of our lifestyle choices than merely whether or not to go out at night.

When models ‘model’ a lifestyle in which life becomes inseparable from work, they glamorize the practice, making it attractive to others (Neff et al., 2005). Further, by actively engaging in self-commodification required by modeling, a practice that is then publicized as part of a glamorous and
fashionable life, models not only make consumption practices, such as following fashion, dressing fashionably, engaging in intensive grooming and patronizing centers of urban nightlife attractive, they provide the raw materials for the commodification of the fashionable life itself.

Models and those who work with them seem to be living a dream, a dream that disguises their aesthetic and entrepreneurial labor, work that sets the stage for increasing levels of immaterial labor, in which consumers’ social networks are pulled toward productive ends, where consumers feel they are freely pursuing what interests them, or creating something that matters to them, while in fact they are creating value for a brand and providing a crucial platform for that brand to realize value. Thus models not only glamorize products by appearing in advertising images; when they go out on the ‘scene’ wearing certain styles and socializing with their peers in exclusive nightspots, or hip neighborhoods, they model a lifestyle that does not say, ‘you must!’ but ‘you may!’ In so doing, they provide raw materials for building what Arvidsson refers to as the ‘intertextual, physical and virtual spaces that pre-structure and anticipate the agency of consumers’ (2005: 247).

In recent decades, the physical spaces of the ‘model life’ have made the jump to the virtual world of television and the internet, in the form of numerous ‘reality’ television shows about the modeling industry such as The Agency, Make Me a Supermodel, America’s Next Top Model, The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency and A Model Life in the USA, along with all of the Top Model franchises throughout the world, which is now in 44 countries, in 117 markets, including not only England and Canada, but also China, Ghana, Nigeria and Honduras (Banks, 2007). The modeling world, as occupied by workers in the industry, or as depicted in these televised settings, creates a framework of self-expression shaped by modeling and fashion. Consumers contribute to the value of this framework by spending their free time watching the television shows about modeling, or actively participating in online communities associated with them, sending each other phone messages ‘from Tyra Banks’ via the ANTM website (www.cwtv.com/shows/americas-next-top-model12), commenting on the blogs, voting to elect the ‘model of the week’, buying ‘Top Model’ t-shirts and other merchandise, or joining Facebook’s group called ‘Addicted to America’s Next Top Model’, which has more than 30,000 members as of this writing. The model life is covered in detail on sites such as www.modelnetwork.com or www.models.com, where participants pick their favorite model, rate runway looks and models’ online portfolios, or follow blogs about the ‘hottest newcomer’, or about fashion weeks around
the world. Models and modeling also attract visits to fashion and modeling websites such as www.style.com, www.fashionista.com, or to the discussion of all things fashion at New York Magazine’s The Cut (nymag.com/daily/fashion/?mid=fashion-alert-20090304), as well as Youtube’s endless loops of models walking runways.

This level of intimacy with the modeling world shapes consumer agency in both direct and indirect ways. An American fashion publicist observed in one of our interviews: ‘people who watch reality television shows about models used to just aspire to be glamorous. Now they aspire to have that specific model look . . . They have a new familiarity with models and what they are and how they look.’ Less directly, the familiarity with models and fashion that these television shows and websites promote doesn’t sell particular products, it provides a platform for brands to become part of the modeling world. These spaces of interaction sell fashion, the idea of being fashionable and access to the know-how for emulating the kinds of images models promote, mediating our experiences of them, thereby shaping and guiding consumer agency that seems to be autonomous, but is in fact directed in ways that increase the value of brands.

CONCLUSION

This article has endeavored to spell out several examples of how models mediate our experience of commodities in ways that are not as straightforward as one might assume, considering that it is their job to pose for photographs and walk runways to create an attraction to and a desire for the clothes or products they are wearing. When models work to produce a desirable image, styling themselves to appear glamorous, or attract attention, they mediate our relationships with the products they use to produce that meaning. As they engage in the system of signs in which glamour or desirability play a part, they also participate in a series of networks in which products, images and people interact, such that images and products are circulated in productive ways. Thus, within these networks, models engage in activities that are productive not only when they are officially ‘at work,’ but also in the quasi-professional social settings that are an integral part of the modeling world. In so doing, models and their peers contribute to the subtle ways branding now gets done, insofar as it plays on meaning by association, in which a mood or feeling can be attached to a product simply by getting it into the hands of a culturally attractive crowd, such as the one found in the modeling world.

By using the social world of modeling to promote their products, brand managers are arguably playing on the model’s social role in which they
'model' a form of life that is potentially productive for the brand. Thus, models mediate our experiences with commodities not only when they are posing for the camera, or walking down the runway, but also when they are walking down the street, attending a party or having a coffee at a local café. The structure of modeling work demands that models ‘model’ a certain kind of life, and in so doing, make it attractive, as something consumers want to participate in or know about. Marketers play on this attraction to the fashionable life, providing it as the raw material that consumers then use to build communities, of fans, or of people who are ‘with it’ or in the know, of people who know about fashion. As desire for community is directed towards pre-determined ends, consumers produce themselves as attentive audiences, delivering themselves for free as marketable units of attention to be bought and sold in the commercial marketplace. The means offered for belonging in this world are the commodities with which this world is associated, not only via the pictures in advertisements in which models appear, but also in the form of the ‘model life’, which those in the modeling world work so hard to produce the image of living. In so doing, they model a lifestyle that is then packaged and sold to us as a commodity, an experience that can be had for the price of our attention.

Notes
1. While most of the female models we talked to were able to make a living at it full time, several of the male models I met supplemented their income with outside jobs, citing the more limited number of jobs open to them in the industry.
2. For a more extensive treatment of immaterial labor in terms of the affective labor of modeling, see Wissinger, 2007.
3. Data from www.tyrbanks.com (Banks, 2007), as confirmed by America’s Next Top Model judge, Nigel Barker, in conversation on 14 August 2007. The popularity of these mediated encounters with the modeling world represents a desire that is particularly acute among young people. The desire stirred by models seems especially pronounced among the thousands of young people who turn out to audition for contests such as the Ford modeling agency’s ‘Supermodel of the World’, or America’s Next Top Model. Reportedly, the Ford ‘Supermodel of the World’ contest selected its finalists from thousands of aspirants in 50 different countries (Espinosa, 2008). For the first time ever, one finalist was selected from the some 20,000 hopefuls who submitted their photographs for consideration via the ‘Ford Supermodel of the World’ Myspace page (Fabrikant, 2008). On its most recent 38-city tour of the USA, the auditions for the television show America’s Next Top Model drew 1500 young women in one day, all hoping to win a spot on the show (Wilson, 2007).
References


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