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Bling leads to ka-ching

Online sites cashing in as people spend millions to buy clothing and items that look like the things celebrities use

- Ellen Lee, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Getting a star-studded look has never been easier.

If you have ever watched "Desperate Housewives" and admired a dress worn by Eva Longoria's character, Gabrielle Solis, coveted a purse that Scarlett Johansson was seen carrying at an event or just wondered how the other half lives and spends money, simply take a peek at a new crop of Web sites.

SeenON, Like.com and Zebo are among a new generation of online shopping destinations, fueled by the latest Internet boom, which have made it simpler than ever to copy a celebrity's style. Joan Rivers and magazines such as People and InStyle have been covering Hollywood fashion and the red carpet for years, but these new sites are taking it a step further, putting fans a mouse click closer to searching, finding and purchasing the identical item -- or one that looks like it.

Like it or not, "entertainment and popular culture creates trends and drives demand for products," said Mike Fitzsimmons, chief executive officer of Delivery Agent, the San Francisco company behind SeenON.

This year, an estimated \$3.07 billion was spent around the world in product placement, according to PQ Media. **Beyonce Knowles, Jennifer Lopez, Madonna, Sean "Diddy" Combs, Will Smith and Oprah Winfrey are among the top trendsetters, according to E-Poll Market Research's E-Score Celebrity survey.**

NBC fielded thousands of inquiries into the lamp decorating the New York apartment where Monica and Rachel, the characters played by Courteney Cox and Jennifer Aniston in the popular sitcom "Friends," lived. When Sarah Jessica Parker, as Carrie Bradshaw in "Sex and the City," began wearing a gold nameplate necklace, thousands of other women did, too.

But until recently, intrepid television and movie buffs had to go out of their way to find what they wanted. Enter SeenON, which lets consumers locate clothing and props used on such shows as "Grey's Anatomy" and the latest James Bond flick, "Casino Royale."

For years, Delivery Agent, through partnerships with 12 networks and 24 studios such as ABC, NBC and Sony Pictures Entertainment, powered their online stores behind the scenes.

Now SeenON has amassed more than 100,000 items on one site, allowing shoppers to browse by show, episode, character, brand and product category. It also introduced a similar arrangement with People and Maxim so that readers can go online to purchase items in the

magazines. And it has plans for an interactive television service in New York with Cablevision that would allow viewers to buy products from popular shows with their remote control.

Storing info digitally

To make SeenON work, costume and production staff digitally categorizes the props and clothing used for each episode -- a one-hour drama can yield more than 200 products -- and sends the information to the company in advance of the airing.

Delivery Agent then compiles the data and offers the items for sale through its partnership with about 1,000 brands and 350 online retailers. It receives a cut of the sales, making an estimated \$25 million this year. Remember the sexy white dress worn by Wilhelmina, played by Vanessa Williams, during a recent episode of "Ugly Betty"? That was a Dolce and Gabbana piece, available at Neiman Marcus for \$1,595.

If that's out of your price range, consider Like.com, developed by Riya in San Mateo. Instead of words, it uses pictures to crawl the Web, finding items that look like one another.

To attract people to its site, it has taken celebrity snapshots and found purses, shoes and accessories that look like the ones worn by Paris Hilton, Jessica Simpson, Knowles and others. It doesn't make an exact match, but it finds necklaces with the same diamond knot or a clutch with a similar floral pattern, most likely for a cheaper price.

In one photograph, Halle Berry is carrying a black tote bag at a movie premiere. Using Like.com, shoppers can search hundreds of online retail sites, such as Amazon.com and Zappos.com, to find a similar-looking black tote bag. If it's just the metal buckle or the front pocket that they like, they can focus their search by drawing a box around the specific detail, then re-running the search. If they buy it, Like.com gets a portion of the sale.

Searching for a style

The goal, of course, is not just to help people accessorize like their favorite stars, but to help them find products based on how they look. Words aren't always an effective way to describe what you're looking for, like a particular pattern on a shirt or the cut of a dress, said Riya CEO and co-founder Munjal Shah. Yet other shopping sites force shoppers to search by entering a text description or narrowing it down by category and brand.

"Some things are hard to describe," Shah said. "How do you describe the pattern of a rug? There may be names (for it) but most people don't know it."

Riya's technology analyzes a photograph by color, shape and other factors, turning it into a mathematical formula and giving it a unique "visual signature." It then scours the Web for pictures with similar signatures.

In the next month or so, Like.com, which is limited so far to shoes, purses and accessories, will add more categories, such as clothes and home and garden items, as well as additional sites such as eBay. It also plans to let people upload photographs of what they're looking for, so that they're not limited to the photographs on the site.

"I think they are heralding a new type of search," said Sucharita Mulpuru, a senior analyst with Forrester Research.

Like.com, she said, is among the more promising sites that have emerged in the latest Web boom. Other new sites include social-networking and book-marking shopping sites such as Stylehive, Wists, ThisNext, Jellyfish, Crowdstorm and Kaboodle.

More effective browsing

"If you don't know what you want and just want to browse, there's no good solution for that," Mulpuru said. "It's a lot of aimless wandering. I think that's what the newer sites are looking to address."

Shoppers are expected to spend about \$211 billion in online retail this year, a 20 percent increase from last year, according to Forrester. In the next few weeks -- starting today with Cyber Monday, when people go online at work to do their holiday shopping -- they'll plunk down an estimated \$27 billion online.

Social-networking site Zebo allows users to share what they own and want. It recently added Minnesota Timberwolves basketball player Mike James as one of its 5 million members. James' list of stuff includes a Maserati, Johnson & Johnson lotion, a Panasonic flat-screen TV and two pit bulls named Bella and Prince.

"People are very interested in what celebrities own," said Zebo founder Roy de Souza. "If you have all that money and become successful, what do you spend it on?"

Though some may feel it encourages people to be more materialistic, the reality is people care about what they own, de Souza said.

"When you buy a \$200 pair of jeans or Nike sneakers, you care about it," he said. "You want to wear it and show people. There are so many choices, so what you own really says a lot about you."

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