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The New Generation of Cool Hunters

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Instagram accounts cataloguing fashion archives, images and inspiration have gained momentum with the subscription boom.



Arkady Abbott works full-time as a graduate law clerk in Adelaide, Australia. His free time, however, is devoted to Unownedspaces, an Instagram account cataloguing nature and outdoor wear.

The page, featuring images of forests, snow covered mountains and animals interspersed with gear from Salomon, Oakley, and other outdoor wear brands, has attracted a cult following of over 60,000 among outdoor and gorpcore enthusiasts.

Up until recently, Abbott considered the account and the time spent on it — curating images from old issues of camping magazines and searching for archival Salomon boots — largely a passion project.

Recently, it's expanded to more. Abbott has launched a Patreon, where subscribers can pay anywhere from $2 to $50 a month to gain access to a collection of images selected by Abbott for brand research, clothing identification for posts on the account, as well as consulting and recommendation services for top tier subscribers. Formal consultations for outdoor wear and luxury brands have followed, and there are plans in the future for a podcast.

Abbott and other operators of "moodboard" accounts have influenced labels and designers since the earliest days of Instagram, and on Tumblr before that. But while social media has launched the careers of countless photographers, stylists and designers, the industry has been slower to bring curators like Abbott into the fold.

That's starting to change. Subscription platforms such as Patreon and Substack, and the disruption caused by the pandemic, have created opportunities for creatives to channel their taste into careers, capitalising on their followings through hi-res imagery, moodboard posts, consultations and collaborations that had been previously overlooked or unavailable online.

"Their knowledge is crazy, and that's why it's so attractive to novices or the designers themselves," said Chris Black, partner of creative and branding agency Done to Death Projects that works with brands like Thom Browne and New Balance. "If you're spending all this time compiling stuff that other people don't have, and you have great taste, that is your value."

Finding a Niche

The most successful moodboard accounts are known for recontextualising a particular genre of images, references and works from Y2K fashion to gorpcore. Creatives like Black may follow accounts like Unownedspaces, Techspec and Organiclab.zip — which combined have a following of over 200,000 — for searchable databases of nature and gorpcore-related images.

Etienne Bolduc, a university student in Montreal, was inspired by early menswear style forums when he started his Instagram My Clothing Archive in 2017. Frustrated by the lack of hi-res imagery and background information available online for avant garde Japanese designers, Bolduc began researching and collating resources for his followers from his own growing collection of clothing, books and accessories, as well as the advertisements, videos and campaigns that accompanied them.

Most of the photos and information he finds come from Japanese magazines, ads and books he then translates, scans and uploads for his followers. Posts range from imagery of Saeko Tsuemura's illustrations for Yohji Yamamoto Pour Homme, Spring/Summer 2002 collection to videos from Jun Takahashi's early Undercover seasons.

The nature of these accounts, and the level of knowledge that comes from sourcing and researching thousands of images, has made those running them experts in an area of study that has few.

"This stuff doesn't come from one magazine," said Bolduc. "It's like five different magazines, a retrospective book, a catalogue and an ad I already have."

For followers who want more, the service they provide has proven worthy paying for. Bolduc, for example, recently launched a YouTube channel, Patreon and shares a Paypal donation link to followers who want to support his work — and access hi-res scans of the images from his Instagram.

Some creatives within the industry have also been ambivalent in acknowledging the roles of archive and moodboard accounts within fashion creative direction, particularly during a time when duplicate designs and overlapping aesthetics can undercut a brand's creative integrity.

"It's an impulse of the internet to want to find more niche references," said jewellery designer Jameel Mohammed, who follows moodboard accounts for inspiration on Black figures and influences within fashion. "I think instead of trying to resist the fact that there is this ongoing influx in image culture, it's better to recognise that it's part of being an artist."

Growing Consulting Work

One of the original digital "moodboarders," Justin Saunders of JJJJound, started with a website of curated images and inspiration in 2008 and propelled a quiet luxury approach to menswear for the industry. Today, he runs a creative agency with its own line of merchandise and collaborations ranging from Vans to A.P.C. and Eddie Bauer.

Abbott and others are also hoping to leverage their archive and moodboard accounts into similar collaborations with brands and creatives. Few so far have made the leap: the people behind Grey93, Unownedspaces and MyClothingArchive all have full-time jobs outside of the fashion industry.

Still there have been exceptions: Organiclab.zip, who wished to remain anonymous, began consulting for brands, designers and other creatives soon after launching in 2018, followed by a Patreon account.

The page gained the attention of several executives from outdoor wear brand Salomon, which led to a collaboration in December on the brand's XA Pro 1 sneaker. Grey93 also has several collaborations with brands on the way, including its own collection of home goods.

In a press release for the sneaker, Salomon praises Organiclab.zip as a moodboard account and "curation practice that values research as a way to approach wholesome living."

Whereas influencers managed to build careers through face-forward personal branding and promotion, archive and moodboard accounts have yet to adopt that same approach: Unownedspaces, Grey93 and Organiclab.zip, for example, all avoid personal posts that would reveal who populates the account.

Some prefer to remain anonymous to avoid infringing on the escapist nature of their accounts, also shying away from promoted posts or features from brands that may be outside of the account's area of specialisation.

Still, some are beginning to use their accounts as a platform to introduce new creatives or their own original artwork or designs, albeit without the personal branding.

Gbemi Adenusi, Tobi Oloketuyi and Tunde Popson started Grey93 as a moodboard account in 2013, and have gradually introduced their own art into the account, along with up and coming designers and musicians from their hometown of Lagos, Nigeria.

They've also expanded into a creative consultancy, with Oloketuyi, Adenusi and Popson advising and creating content for Kanye West's Life of Pablo album, Travis Scott's Astroworld tour and designer Spencer Badu.

"We're not trying to box ourselves into being a moodboard or archive page," said Adenusi of Grey93.

These collaborations, and the funds they bring in, will only keep these accounts growing.

"While doing research [for Organiclab.zip] I was literally being paid to put content aside for clients," said the account's owner. "It was a bit more sustainable that way ... there's kind of a limit to what you can dig up and show to the world."

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