

Wearable fashion: hot or not?



By JoJo Rowden

Recent months have seen an influx of wearable devices sashaying their way down the technology catwalk.

A host of large retail players including Nike, Samsung, and Apple, are scrambling to find that magical intersection of function and fashion, with arguably limited success to date.

To say that there has been no interest from consumers would be unfair. The hardcore lifeloggers and fitness fanatics out there have delighted in the latest gadgets and gizmos designed to unobtrusively capture data about their life passions. But is that enough?

What about the chic masses out there, still waiting to be wowed by apparel that is both useful and beautiful?

The challenge I see is making these products as necessary to our lives as our smartphones and tablets, invisibly integrated into our everyday world. This is no mean feat.

Already some are bowing out of the wearable market gracefully, perhaps realising that there is much to be done to achieve this

goal. Nike has moved aside in the wearable field, shelving its future FuelBand fitness concept and strategically shifting its focus back to fitness products and software, rather than hardware.

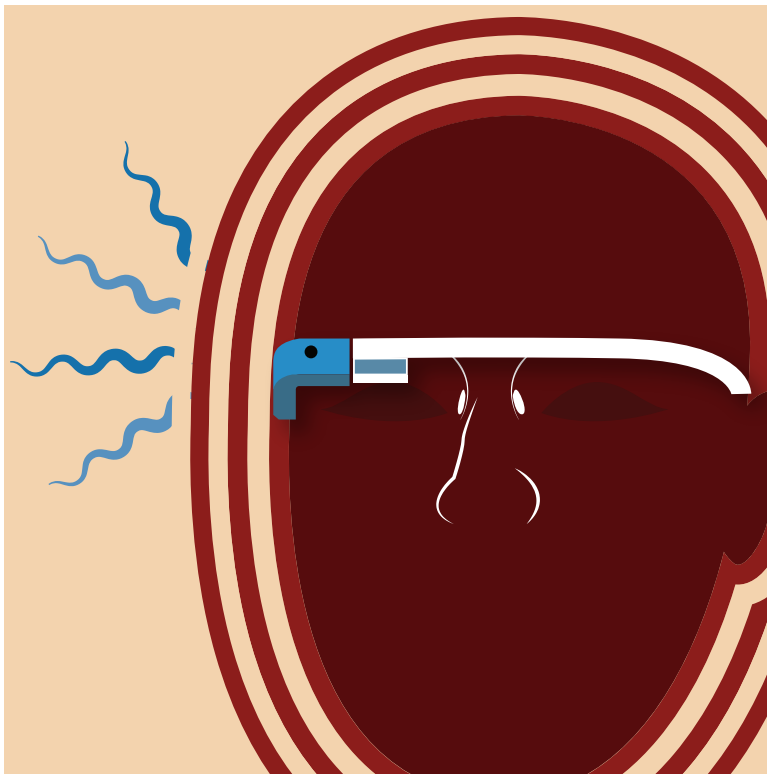
It's plain to see that if these players want to create a wearable product that captures our hearts and our wallets on a more permanent basis, there are a few areas that they need to address.

Appearance

Anything that I wear on my body tells a story about me. I want to wear pieces that make me feel beautiful, powerful, or provoke interest and conversation from others. It communicates to the world who I am and what I care about.

It stands to reason therefore that I would rather die than be seen in the clunky and conspicuous offerings that have dominated the wearable realm until fairly recently, where at last, we are beginning to see a much needed collaboration between tech manufacturers and fashion industry designers.

The complaint that I hear most often is around the size and intrusiveness of devices. If my new purchase is going to draw the eye of others, I want it to be for the right reasons, not because I look like an extra from Star Trek.



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Instabeat founder, Hind Hobeika, has invested a great deal of time and effort in reducing the size and weight of her wearable swimming device by half its original dimensions, understanding the impact of size on the uptake of wearers. Others are starting to move in a similar direction, appreciating that discreet is desirable when it comes to wearables.

Additional objections to appearance are around the choice of materials used. There is absolutely no need for a luminous piece of plastic to belong in the wardrobe of any self respecting adult. Some companies are experimenting with hardier, and sleeker materials as time goes by,

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and this can only be a positive in making these devices sexier and more attractive.

It is worth exploring gender differences here too. Belinda Parmar, CEO of tech consultancy, Lady Geek, believes women will be the biggest market for wearable tech, and yet, there are few examples where gender has been deliberately taken into account in designing these products.

The makers of the MEMI smart bracelet claim to be the first wearable technology made by women, for women, building on the fact that they have really focused on what women want: “We believe that fashion and function are equally important. Our friends don’t want to wear big, black, bulky tech devices. In fact, they don’t wear ‘devices’, they wear jewellery”.

In order to appeal beyond the typical demographic of tech savvy guys who enjoy showing off their latest toy, retailers are beginning to engage in some serious visual design, thinking about both ergonomics and materials.

Apple has appointed Angela Ahrendts, former CEO of Burberry, to tackle the task of designing wearable tech that people actually want to wear, and FitBit is following suit with Tory Burch,



WORKOUT SUMMARY

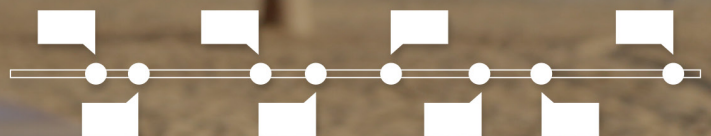
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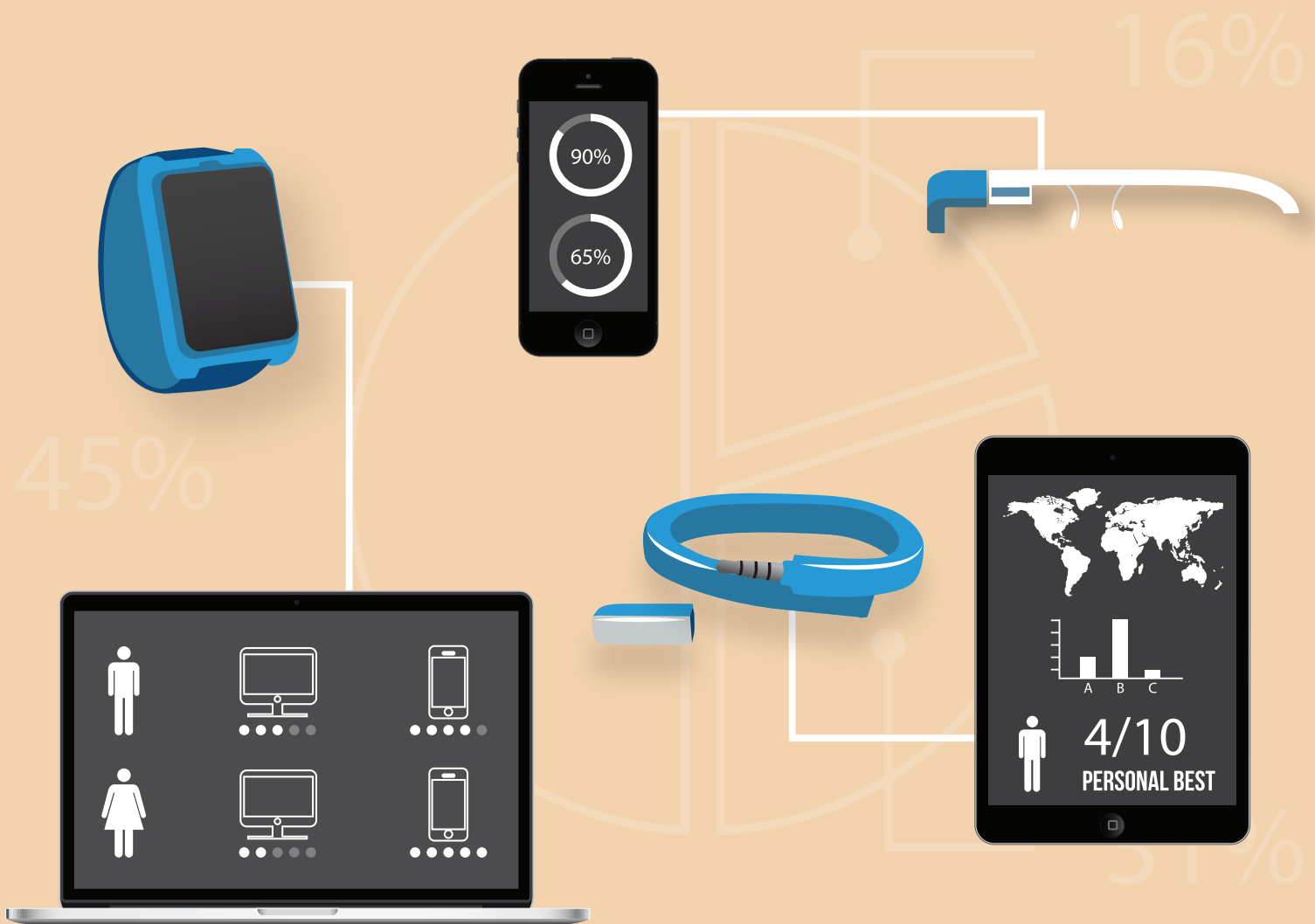
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WORKOUT LOCATIONS
4/10
PERSONAL BEST





attempting to transform the gadget into a chic accessory that can be worn for work, evening, or weekend.

The fashion industry is realising that it needs to drive the way for wearable fashion, rather than simply riding the wave as it comes at them from technology companies.

Misfit wearables is an admirable example of technology and fashion playing nicely, with its 'Shine' product available in a glamorous necklace setting as well as the prevailing wristband style seen elsewhere.

Pricing

Fashion is by definition fickle. It is about engaging in the latest styles, wearing what's hot, and dropping what's not. In an industry of ever changing trends, pricing

is a huge consideration. High end fashion with an established brand can price higher, knowing that consumers are paying for a certain image, but wearables definitely aren't playing in that space just yet.

Throw into the mix that technology is ever improving and iterating over design, and it soon becomes obvious that steep pricing just won't cut it in this market if widespread adoption is the goal.

No consumer wants to spend big on an item that will be obsolete in a matter of months, instead waiting until the core product is fairly stable with the features that they want. This waiting period deprives the retailer of valuable product feedback, which could have been incorporated into the next version of the item.

Current pricepoints are fairly

high, which constrains wearable devices to a more affluent market segment.

Market research firm, GfK, discovered in a study of 16 to 24 year old consumers that purchase intent for wearables drops by at

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least 50 per cent when price is introduced.

To encourage a larger number of consumers to embrace wearables and to make them part of day to day life they must become more affordable to the masses.

Function

When it comes to wearable fashion I want to understand why I should wear the piece in the first place. What does it give me that my smartphone doesn't?

There needs to be a compelling reason for me to put this thing on my body regularly, or else the novelty will soon wear off and it will be shoved in the back of my cupboard.

It is perhaps easier to imagine how these devices can be used meaningfully in the medical, industrial, and military industries, rather than on an individual level.

There are a multitude of devices out there offering me information about my sporting prowess (or lack

of), allowing me to interact with my social networks, and also providing me with entertainment beyond the usual YouTube videos. These are all well and good, but are they unique enough, or useful enough, to seek them out?

Some of the more interesting experiments have included vibrating underwear (Funderwear) for remote couples to transfer touch across distance, and the Alert Shirt, a jersey that allows sports fans to physically feel what a player is experiencing on the field.

These are novel and exciting developments, but arguably, still not beneficial enough to the individual to warrant daily wear.

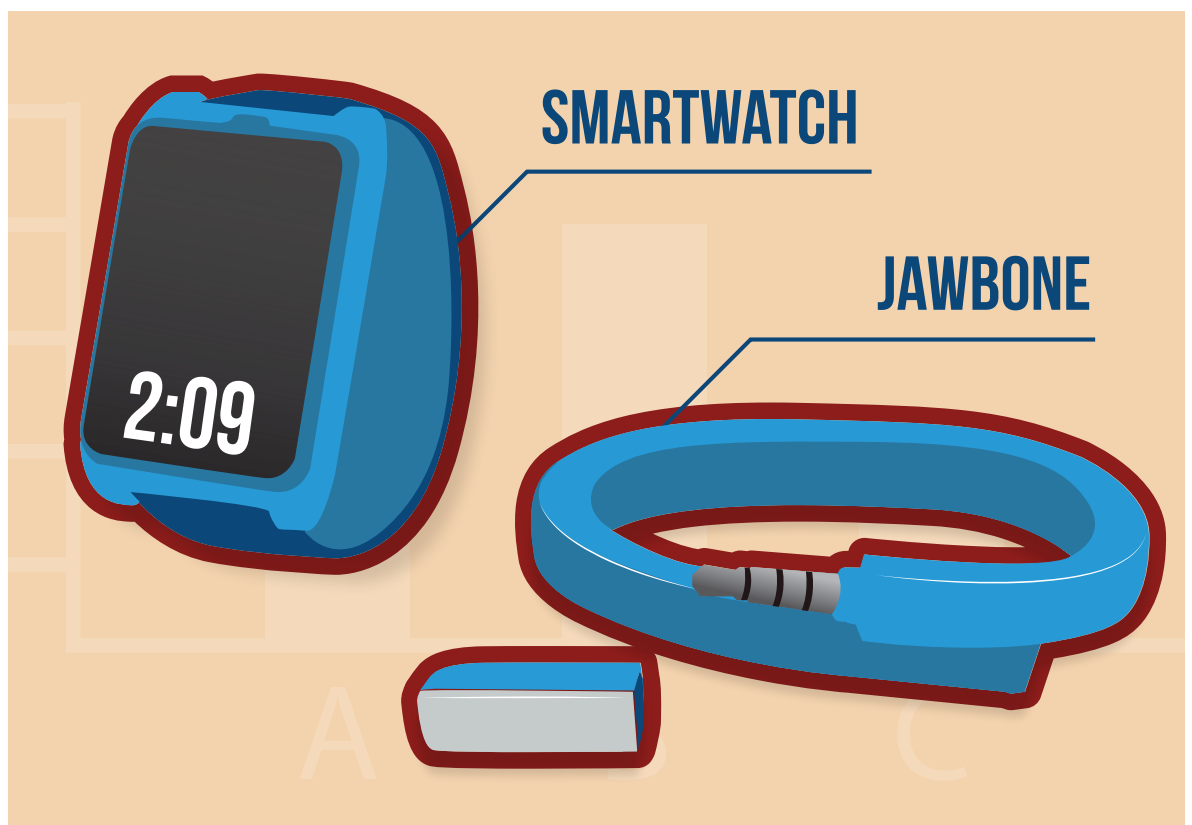
The other side to being useful is being available. If the wearable needs constant charging it is instantly less practical.

Consumers want constant connection, and having to charge more than weekly becomes prohibitive. There have been some improvements in battery life of

late; Ineda systems have developed processors they claim could allow wearables to last for 30 days without charging.

“To be usable, there must be somewhere to distill, collate, and view the data that is collected to make it meaningful to the user.”

Bluetooth is also evolving to rise to the challenge of providing a low energy solution to take advantage of the increasing number of Bluetooth enabled smartphones



and devices through which wearables can connect, and still enjoy prolonged battery life.

This brings us to consider the ecosystem in which the wearable lives. The wearable product rarely exists in isolation.

To be usable, there must be somewhere to distill, collate, and view the data that is collected to make it meaningful to the user. Without access to this information, wearing the tech is pointless.

Manufacturers must decide what makes sense in terms of interacting with, or partnering with, apps, platforms, or other devices to provide this value. Evidence suggests that there is a drive towards standalone capability for the wearable device itself, but the link between mobile and wearables will remain strong for the foreseeable future.

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Always on: privacy and distraction

As we move into a world in which we are always plugged in, one has to wonder about the impact of introducing yet more ways in which we can be

constantly distracted.

Some feel that this intrusion on our social interactions means that we are no longer paying attention to our surroundings or companions, that the virtual world is engulfing the physical, and that the sci-fi movie we watched when we were young is suddenly, and scarily, within the realm of feasibility.

Questions around productivity and our ability to understand and retain information while our attention is constantly diverted abound.

Retailers need to give serious consideration to these issues while designing, as people start to backlash against ‘screen suck’, the phenomenon of heads being constantly stuck in phones and tablets. Google Glass, for example, was designed to be deliberately non-distracting, and yet, as new features are added, the risk still remains a significant one.

There is also privacy. Worries around data security feature high in the minds of consumers today. This will only be magnified as we move beyond the web, when the data is coming directly from our physical person in a constant stream.

As a wearer of these sorts of devices, I want to understand what data is being collected about my identity, habits, and whereabouts. I want to know who has access to that information and what they are using it for.

We already broadcast constantly into the social abyss of Twitter and Facebook, potentially giving complete strangers an overload of our private information.

Pedro Oliveira and Xuedi Che of New York University have unveiled a smart dress that becomes more

transparent with the amount of data that a user shares, designed to show how much we share without realising it.

If we look at the wearable world it might appear that the separate pieces of data collected are not particularly valuable or telling to anyone beyond the individual user, however, a collated view of your aggregated data, combined with your personal information might be very telling about your lifestyle and daily patterns and routines.

It will become more and more important to make visible exactly what data the wearable is collecting and also to give the power back to consumers to control exactly what and how much they share with the outside world.

Hot or not?

As we shift towards a world where computing becomes ubiquitous, the possibilities for wearable fashion are endless and exciting.

Once these challenges are addressed, there will be no stopping the retail giants from attracting just the kind of attention they are after.

There are certainly constraints to consider, but the companies blazing the trail in the wearable market understand that from constraints come the greatest innovations, and they aren’t ready to give up just yet.

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