

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/fubu-how-the-90s-brand-is-courting-the-instagram-generation-11614006448>

ON TREND

Fubu: The Brand of LL Cool J and Nas Is Courting Generation Z

Fubu's logo-heavy clothes were inescapable in the '90s, driving a \$350 million-a-year business. Nearly 30 years later, the brand is relaunching through licensing deals and collaborations aimed at a younger generation.



Fubu's four founders modeling in a campaign shoot for the brand's recent collaboration with Puma.

PHOTO: FUBU



By

[Jacob Gallagher](#)

Feb. 22, 2021 10:07 am ET



Listen to this article

8 minutes

THE FOUR FOUNDERS of Fubu—childhood friends Daymond John, J. Alexander Martin, Keith Perrin and Carlton Brown—never imagined the fashion brand would make it this far. As Mr. Perrin recalls, when the quartet got together in the Hollis neighborhood of Queens in New York to start the label in 1992, “our mindset was we had to make as much money as we can because we don’t know how long this thing is going to last.”

Yet last it has. Fubu (an acronym for “For Us, By Us”) is nearing its 30th year in business, remarkable longevity that’s comparable to that of powerhouse brands like Nike and Ralph Lauren. The founders admit that Fubu’s public profile has faded in the past decade or so. At its peak, around 1999 to 2002, the company was grossing \$350 million a year according to its founders. “We were on such a grand scale in the ’90s and early 2000s that anything less than that, I guess, to our audience felt like we went away,” said Mr. Brown during a recent Zoom interview conducted with all four founders.

Over the last few years, the brand has been orchestrating a relaunch the founders hope will appeal to the generation of ’90s babies born after Fubu debuted. The plan has included collaborations with Puma and Urban Outfitters, as well reissues of the sort of baggy logoed gear that was inescapable on MTV and in the pages of XXL magazine through the ’90s and early 2000s. Most recently, Fubu has relaunched its affordable suiting line in partnership with Karako, a Manhattan tailoring label, and added new licensees in Europe and South Africa.

Some Gen-Z style icons have embraced the revitalized Fubu. In January singer Lil Nas X posted a photo on his Instagram of himself wearing a \$129 camo Fubu hoodie, while that same month NBAer Kyle Kuzma arrived at a game in a full Fubu corduroy sweatsuit.



Two of Fubu founders, Keith Perrin (left) and Daymond John (right) posing with LL Cool J in 1998.

PHOTO: FUBU

As the founders tell it, hard-earned lessons from their three decades in business are culminating in this brand refresh. Early on, the foursome was preternaturally skilled at grassroots marketing. Long before social media and influencers who post #sponsored-content, Fubu was seeding free products to everyone from reverends to rappers, expanding its footprint through grassroots outreach. With very low overhead, Fubu

managed to get valuable press from musicians in particular. During the heyday of MTV and BET, you could see Fubu clothes in videos for acts like Brand Nubian, Mariah Carey and O.D.B.

No artist gave Fubu a bigger boost than LL Cool J. In a 1997 Gap ad, the then-cosmically popular rapper wore a conspicuous “FB” Fubu hat and even boldly snuck “For Us, By Us” into his rap. Reportedly, after the spot ran, fans visited Gap stores, asking where they could find the Fubu. But Gap was slow to react to this hijacking of their commercial. “That thing ran for 30 days...we couldn’t believe it. ‘They’re not going to take this thing down,’” said Mr. John, who is perhaps best known now as a judge on “Shark Tank,” the hit ABC show in which entrepreneurs vie to get funding. In the social-media age, such a Trojan Horse marketing move would likely get flagged immediately. The moment the ad ran, you’d have people tweeting that @Gap had been had by @Fubu.

Such visible ties to the decade’s hip-hop wave lifted Fubu’s business, but they also left the brand exposed. “We became synonymous with the ’90s and at that time it was a help,” said Mr. Brown. “But I think as time went on, styles changed.” He went so far as to liken hip-hop-fashion’s popularity to that of disco—another red-hot scene that cooled quickly. The mammoth logos on many of Fubu’s designs didn’t help either. When “you see a hundred people wearing Fubu at a club...you feel like [they’re] a thousand people in Fubu because everybody got this damn big FB,” said Mr. John.



Part of Fubu's latest collection, the "Utility Hoodie" sells for \$129.

PHOTO: FUBU

During this period, Fubu took stabs at broadening its offerings. It introduced a more fitted jean around 2003, just as slender denim was becoming a huge trend propagated by haute Parisian fashion labels like Dior Homme. But slim jeans weren't what was expected from Fubu, and store buyers didn't bite. The foursome also noted that Fubu had licenses for kids clothes, womenswear and suits. From around 2002 to 2004, according to Mr. John, the number one rental tuxedo in the U.S. was a Fubu design.

Often, though, Fubu was just thought of as the brand with the bold "FB" clothes and nothing more. Like so many Black-led clothing brands, Fubu got pigeonholed in the narrow lane of "urban" fashion. "We didn't like them calling us urban," said Mr. John. "Why is it urban? Is it because people of color design it or people of color wear it or you can buy it where people of color live?"

Outside of America, the “urban” label hasn’t held Fubu back and its licenses in countries like Korea and the Philippines have thrived. Mr. John said that, in Germany, where the brand has “a great distributor,” Fubu is sold alongside higher-end runway labels like Off-White.



Fubu’s current collection includes youthful logo hoodies and sweats.

PHOTO: FUBU

In America, it has taken Gen-Z to inject energy into Fubu again. “That’s kind of what sparked the whole rebirth of the brand,” said Mr. Perrin. In recent years, teens and twenty-somethings are finding Fubu through vintage shops and ’90s-obsessed resale platforms like Depop.com. Depop has over 5,000 pre-owned Fubu items for sale right now and, during a peak in October 2020, it saw in-app searches for “Fubu” increase 60% from the months before.

Kyle Lewis, 25, a vintage dealer in Los Angeles, resells and collects used Fubu clothing. He fondly recalls getting his first Fubu T-shirt when he was around nine or 10 years old. “Back then Fubu was the thing,” he said. “You look in the pages of XXL magazine, you look in the pages of the Source magazine, everybody had Fubu...in my community that was just something that you had to have.”



The four founders in 1997, during the brand's pre-Y2K heyday.

PHOTO: FUBU

Mr. Lewis credits contemporary rappers like Travis Scott and Kendrick Lamar for resurrecting the baggy shapes that marked Fubu's '90s designs. To him and his peers, the big fits and big logos aren't passé, they're on trend.

As many Americans strove to support Black-owned businesses in the wake of the May 2020 killing of George Floyd, Fubu sales doubled each month from the one before—for six straight months. "Our business started to see a bit of a scale because of the whole Black Lives Matter movement, and, you know, everybody was buying Black and was looking at us like, 'Hey Fubu's been around all this time,'" said Mr. Perrin. That combination of factors lifted the brand's profile in a way that hadn't happened for over a decade. Last August, on the Pharrell Williams song, "Entrepreneur," Jay-Z rapped "For every one Gucci, support two Fubus."

In December, the brand enjoyed a grassroots boost, when a discussion of Fubu burbled up on Twitter. In response to one comment, film director [Matthew A. Cherry](#) [tweeted](#) the clip of LL Cool J's 1997 Gap commercial with his sly Fubu plugs and triggered an avalanche of tweets from young users who'd never seen the ad before. That day, "Fubu" was a trending topic on the platform. The brand's founders hope that some of those Gen Z posters will be so enamored they'll go get their own FB hoodie.

MORE IN STYLE & FASHION

[What Are Instagram 'Fit Pics,' Why Are They So Popular and Who Is Taking Them?](#) February 15, 2021

[Why Millennials and Gen Z Are Opting for Comfy Shoes Made for Grandparents](#) February 11, 2021

[The Balaclava—Functional Yet Creepy—Makes a Pandemic Comeback](#) February 1, 2021

[How Men Will Dress Once Covid is Over](#) January 25, 2021

[Are 'Luxury Mystery Boxes' the Future of Discount Shopping?](#) January 19, 2021

Write to Jacob Gallagher at Jacob.Gallagher@wsj.com

Copyright © 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.