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Tracy Sun’s mashup of  
psychology, fashion and tech

By Nerissa Pacio Itchon

With venture capital investments drying up, once-hot tech startups shuttering and speculation of another Silicon Valley bust, it’s good to be Tracy Sun.

As a co-founder and vice president of merchandising at Poshmark, the 38-year-old Mission District resident is one of the driving forces behind the thriving social commerce app, which in April raised \$25 million in new funding for a total of \$70 million-plus since its 2011 launch.

A leading retailer in an increasingly crowded market of buying and selling secondhand clothing and accessories online, Poshmark has amassed more than 1.5 million sellers, who engage with the app an average of seven times (and 25 minutes) per day, according to the company.

“Those are the kind of numbers you’d expect to hear from a Facebook or a Pinterest,” says Sun, dressed in a blue 10 Crosby top and black leather mini-skirt paired with YSL heels (purchased on Poshmark). “You don’t often hear that kind of addictiveness or engagement in a commerce app.”

Unlike many Silicon Valley entrepreneurs with more traditional tech-centric backgrounds, Sun’s entree into the industry was far from typical.

Born in Kuala Lumpur and raised in New York, Sun thought neuropsychology would be her calling. After a premed track at Columbia University, Sun’s first job was working with Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s patients.

“I thought I was going to cure diseases,” says Sun at the company’s slick new Redwood Shores headquarters in Redwood City. “As it turns out, I found myself in fashion.”

Sun moved to New Hampshire to earn an MBA from Dartmouth College, and started as an intern at Brooklyn Industries, a fashion apparel startup in New York City. In three years, she rose to VP of merchandising and inventory planning, learning traditional merchandising and overseeing the design process firsthand.

“I’ve always been fascinated by people’s behavior and what causes them to do the things they do,” says the former psychology major. “Fashion is one of those things everybody participates in in the world. You get

up every day and put something on — even though you think you didn’t make that decision.”

Sun arrived in Silicon Valley in 2010, when her interests in fashion, entrepreneurship and technology collided.

“I loved product, and product that you could touch, but I wanted to have greater influence,” she says. “That’s hard to do if you don’t have technology powering your brand.”

A fortuitous meeting with former acquaintance Emily Melton (a partner at a Menlo Park venture firm and now a formal adviser to Poshmark) led to an introduction to Poshmark’s co-founder and CEO Manish Chandra.

Chandra, a Silicon Valley veteran, was exiting his social shopping company Kaboodle and was looking to start another fashion-tech venture.

With their complementary backgrounds, Chandra and Sun hit it off, brainstormed product ideas over the course of that year, and Poshmark — a hybrid of the words “posh” and “marketplace” — was born.

“She didn’t have that traditional background where you looked at her schools or companies and could presume anything,” recalls Melton, formerly a partner at the Mayfield Fund when she began networking with Sun. “But she was extremely bright. She knew something was happening in Silicon Valley and that her expertise in how the fashion world worked, and the way consumers think about fashion, was an asset that could be leveraged if put in the right environment.”

Like an eBay for Millennials, Poshmark sellers post photos of items straight from their phones to their virtual closets and sell them to other community members. Users tag, comment on and follow each other’s feeds, adding a vibrant social media element to a transaction.

“Millennials are a generation that doesn’t like to be advertised to, to be told by authority what to do,” says Sun about Poshmark’s target audience. “But what they do love is peer recommendation. Their idols are Instagram famous, rather than celebrity famous.”

Poshmark also manages the



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

Poshmark co-founder Tracy Sun at the company’s new offices in Redwood City.

infrastructure needed to transact, from sending a prepaid shipping label to the seller to depositing 80 percent of the sale directly into the seller’s account.

About \$3 million in merchandise is uploaded daily with a sale being made every five seconds, according to the company. Recently, Poshmark launched a wholesale portal that allows its top 200,000 sellers to sell new inventory

While Sun admits that pitching the concept of the female-oriented app to a predominantly white male audience had its challenges in the beginning, she’s quick to note that rejection is simply par for the course.

“Every entrepreneur has to have a healthy dose of delusion,” says Sun. “You’re innovating in a world that has not yet come to understand your ideas. We had 99 percent of the world telling us no.”

With 75 percent of Poshmark’s 105-person staff being female, colleagues have also witnessed Sun’s influence on the company’s diversity consciousness.

“Tracy might not always be the loudest person in the room, but when she speaks, everyone listens,” wrote Poshmark’s director of merchandising Kate Franco in an email. “She is acutely aware of the differences in the way men and women communicate, and as a founder, has played a central role in establishing Poshmark as a place where female leaders can thrive.”

Sun likes to think she and Chandra have also infused a sense of fun into the culture.

There’s a full bar in the office cafeteria for happy hour, intradepartmental pingpong

tournaments, scavenger hunts, and conference rooms named after fashion designers (including Rachel Zoe, one of the company’s celebrity investors).

“Poshmark is ultimately a software company,” Sun says. “Under the covers of the brand is some of the most sophisticated technology being built. But then, we’re very much a fashion company, right?”

As for Sun’s own virtual closet, it’s a reflection of her own edgy tastes, which skew toward niche contemporary fashion brands.

“I’m completely obsessed with (Derek Lam’s) 10 Crosby, so I’m constantly looking for people who are adding that brand,” she says.

Her move to San Francisco, however, has inspired a more relaxed Northern California style.

“You’ll find lots of Patagonia in my closet,” says Sun, who spends weekends hiking in Marin with her border collie. “And I’ve built up my collection of leather jackets and sunglasses, which is very San Francisco. But black is still my favorite color!”

Nerissa Pacio Itchon is a Peninsula freelance writer. Email: style@sfcronicle.com



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