

The Gilded Cage: Social Media and Fashion Consumption

by [Aidan La Poche](#)

*"I want loads of clothes and fuckloads of diamonds,
I heard people die while they are trying to find them . . .
And I am a weapon of massive consumption
and it's not my fault, it's how I'm programmed to function."*

– Lily Allen, The Fear

When the clock strikes 10:00 a.m., I could be out the door or still in bed. But if I am conscious, I will be on *The RealReal* app for the morning drop. I'm used to the ritual: my fingers move quickly as I press "My TRR." Eyes peeled, I scroll in search of possibility. There's usually nothing notable in JW Anderson or Kansai Yamamoto. Everything in my saved searches for Ludovic de Saint Sernin or 'Anna Sui T-Shirt' is still sold out. My heart beats a little faster when I get to Ashley Williams or Simone Rocha . . . still nothing. I quickly consider if there is anything else I want to search for: maybe 'purple pants' or a 'Vivienne Westwood bag.' Most days, within six or seven minutes, I'm done. Until 7:00 p.m.

The RealReal, an online and brick-and-mortar marketplace, is the world's largest luxury consignment retailer (*The RealReal*). Every day at 10:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., a new drop of clothing becomes available on the website and app, although the 10 a.m. release is substantially larger (hence my obsession). The daily influx of new clothing represents the multitudinous people who send their old or unneeded garments to *The RealReal's* team of authenticators. The intention is that one's old clothing gets priced and resold, in the hope that one man's trash is really another man's treasure. *The RealReal* isn't particularly unique, nor did it reinvent the way we shop: consignment stores have been

around for decades. Yet the scale of *The RealReal*'s platform is unprecedented. They have registered over 27 million shoppers worldwide, and sold more than 24 million items. In ten years, they've paid out over 2.5 billion dollars in commission and opened nineteen retail locations (*The RealReal*). I know I'm not the only one checking and refreshing *The RealReal* every day. Many others have similar habits: people for whom online shopping has turned into a calling.

We no longer live in an era where individuals determine what fashion is. In the seminal 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda Priestly, the editor-in-chief of a fictional fashion magazine, illustrates the inescapable influence of those who run the fashion industry. When her assistant Andy laughs about the similarity between two blue belts, Priestly states with barely hidden ferocity: "It's sort of comical that you think you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when in fact, you're wearing a sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room, from a pile of stuff" (00:24:15-00:24:26). The audience, along with Andy, quickly understands that fashion operates from the top down: the clothing that filters into 'regular' stores is the result of millions of dollars and hundreds of creatives who put something on a runway many months before. Because everyone wears clothing, no one is exempt from the influence of the fashion industry. We are all engaging with fashion – and subject to the industry's ideas of fashion – all the time. According to Priestly, we might as well learn the difference between two seemingly identical blue belts, if only to have a smidgen of autonomy within a structure we can't escape.

However, *The Devil Wears Prada* came out before the rise of social media, before we had access to the fashion habits of an exponentially greater number of people from all over the world. The scope of today's fashion industry was likely inconceivable in the mid-2000s. Today, there's a never-ending flow of new and resold clothing, and anyone can scroll through legions of online shopping platforms that seem more and more like social media platforms. Scrolling on *The RealReal* doesn't actually feel any different than scrolling on *Instagram*. It's easy, mindless, and familiar: there's a 'like' button, a save feature, and of course, a purchase button that has my shipping and payment information readily accessible. The serotonin bursts of social media mix with the intrinsic rush of shopping, combining to form a lethal cocktail of addictive adrenaline. Other shopping apps, *Depop* for example, further blur the line between social media and online shopping, as you can follow your friends and see their likes and purchases within the app. Liking photos of vintage sweaters and rare concert t-shirts feels similar to liking someone's photos of their friends and families. Consequently, when someone comments 'so cute!' on a pair of vintage \$190 Comme Des Garçons trousers on *Depop*, it's easy to forget that they aren't talking about a person. These apps have given the fashion industry a new form by combining the acts of shopping and scrolling. Yet the most original app to promote shopping is not a dedicated fashion app but *TikTok*.

TikTok may seem like a surprising hub for fashion. Its form – short, easily digestible videos – feels like a space for people rather than brands. For example, the content on *TikTok*'s 'For You Page' (FYP) seems casual and sometimes haphazard compared to the curated quality of a filtered, posed photo on *Instagram* or *Facebook*. The posts on one's FYP are often from strangers, and scrolling through *TikTok* can feel like engaging with a community, creating a disarming sense of authenticity and fraternity. 'Outfit of the day' (OOTD) videos, which made the process of filming and presenting one's outfit look casual and vulnerable, felt like a natural development. Quickly, OOTD and 'get ready with me' videos gained traction; it wasn't long until fashion on *TikTok*, or 'FashionTok', branched out into an entire category of its own. People post their closets, their wishlists, fashion shows, and fashion events, as well as what they are buying, selling, and making. *TikTok* has become the perfect platform to market an article of clothing, presenting a garment styled and in motion, desirable and accessible to any person who sees it.

TikTok became an instrument in the fashion industry as well. Prada, Louis Vuitton, and Saint Laurent now live-stream their shows on *TikTok*, while social media stars like Charli D'Amelio and Noah Beck sit front row at in-person shows. In a 2020 *Vogue Magazine* article titled "How TikTok Changed Fashion This Year," the Director of Creator Community at *TikTok*, Kudzi Chikumbu, states that the app "goes beyond the outfits and into creative expression. *TikTok* is a place for joy, and it's giving the fashion industry a whole new way of showcasing their art and personality" (Chikumbu qtd. in Allaire). This sense of user excitement and authenticity, the article continues, changes "the fashion game" (Allaire). Yet the article only hints at the economic impact of *TikTok* and other social media platforms like it. Thanks in large part to social media, the secondhand luxury market grew in estimated value by 65% from 2017 to 2021 (Rooks). The luxury sector today is thriving, with young people as a leading consumer demographic. LVMH, a multinational corporation specializing in luxury goods, recorded organic revenue growth of 51% compared to 2019 in their fashion and leather goods sector (LVMH). The management and consulting organization McKinsey and Company also cites social media commerce and in-app purchases as leading factors in the industry's massive growth (McKinsey & Company).

If fashion's influence felt inescapable in 2006's *The Devil Wears Prada*, our habits of consumption in 2022 make the industry's gilded cage ever easier to enter and harder to escape. Every time we use our phones, we are being told what to buy, what to wear, and by proxy who to be. Although the *Vogue* article champions *TikTok* as a beacon of individuality and authenticity, *TikTok*'s platform for fashion may spark the opposite. As algorithms feed us garments to spend money on, our phones alter our senses of personal style. Fashion becomes less about individual self-expression and more about fitting into a subculture or microtrend already visible online. And our consumption incurs an even larger cost than our surrender to these niche forms of uniformity. Garment production at our current rate is quite literally toxic. The amount of resource

consumption, greenhouse gas emission, and landfills created by the fashion industry, coupled with commonplace child labor practices, represent deep-rooted flaws in both the fashion industry and our current consumption patterns.

One solution is to embrace sustainably made clothing and the circular fashion industry. But companies are a step ahead of educated consumers. If you log onto *The RealReal* and click on an item you like, you may find something called the ‘TRR Sustainability Calculator,’ a feature that tells a consumer the net liters of water and kilograms of carbon ostensibly saved by their purchase. Underneath, a statement reads: “By purchasing this item, you’re contributing to a more sustainable fashion future” (*The RealReal*). ‘Fast Fashion Facts’ on the website – 50% of fast fashion is disposed of in less than one year, for example – drive home the importance of *The RealReal*’s supposed commitment to sustainability and circular reuse (*The RealReal*). Yet the app’s feature that appeals to our environmental consciousness can feel like a marketing tool. The Sustainability Calculator is hard to miss, as it’s sandwiched between the condition description for an item and the website’s return policy. This reassurance that one’s purchase is good for the planet attaches a sense of morality to consumption. This isn’t exactly greenwashing: second-hand clothing really is a more environmentally conscious way to shop. Yet the Sustainability Calculator, by providing just enough information to make a consumer feel good enough to click and buy a \$1,495 crocodile-trimmed Gucci bag, offers only a mystified sense of environmental ‘goodness,’ not a genuine or probing analysis of resources used and saved.

The attachment of morality to shopping – the notion that by purchasing clothing, you are saving the planet – creates an aura of guilt-free consumption that allows buyers to deceive themselves as they give into their obsessions. I lied earlier, too: I don’t just spend six or seven minutes a day on *The RealReal*. My Screen Time (one of Apple’s more passive-aggressive inventions) tells me I lose about forty-four minutes to *The RealReal* each day. And that’s just one app. I haven’t even mentioned the time I spend on *Depop*, *Vestiaire Collective*, *eBay*, *SSENSE*, *Instagram*, *TikTok*, etc. Rarely do I purchase anything – it’s the thrill of the hunt that draws me in, the addiction to the mindless engagement of scrolling. This phenomenon is defined by Professor David T. Courtwright as “limbic capitalism,” a term he coined in his 2019 book *The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business*. Courtwright explains: “Civilized inventiveness weaponized pleasurable products and pastimes. The more rapid and intense the brain reward they imparted, the likelier they were to foster pathological learning and craving, particularly among socially and genetically vulnerable consumers” (9). Excessive consumption, according to Courtwright, becomes a compulsory desire for those who fall prey to the instant gratification of technology. Our limbic system – the part of the brain responsible for behavioral and emotional responses – is manipulated by corporate interests that keep us hooked to apps and websites. In turn, fashion consumption has metamorphosed from a process of observing, judging, desiring, traveling, and purchasing into a scroll through a feed. In a

world where our feeds and click-throughs can be individualized, algorithms increasingly exploit our interests and desires. It's worth questioning, then, whether a personal sense of artistry and style can co-exist with the 'personalized' hyper-consumerism of socially-mediated fashion.

Katie, a TikToker my age, posts her outfits semi-regularly to a following of 19,000 people. I asked Katie what drew her to post her outfits online. To her, it felt self-explanatory: "It's fun and I like curating an aesthetic . . . People are nice and supportive, for the most part." She explained to me that she gained followers from posting regularly and that her most popular videos are 'hauls' in which she posts her recent purchases. Like me, Katie spends a lot of time browsing online, yet she has a different understanding of the habit from mine: "I probably look at clothes every day, but I think it's more of an interest than an obsession. I love fashion, and I love to express myself through clothing and, like, really invest time into my closet so I will have pieces I love forever." Katie isn't dissatisfied with her consumption habits, as I am. Speaking about microtrends on *TikTok*, she claims she's rarely swayed by the platform, and prefers asking her friends for their recommendations and opinions. To her, fashion feels exciting and enjoyable; it's also balanced between her virtual and real life.

Inevitably, our conversation landed on the infamous micro-miniskirt trend spawned from Miu Miu's Spring 2022 ready-to-wear collection. For those who self-define as fashion neophytes (think Andy from *The Devil Wears Prada*), Miu Miu debuted a series of miniskirts in October of 2021 that were reminiscent of an early 2000s trend: incredibly small and low-waisted, almost belt-size. The style is closely linked to figures like Paris Hilton and Christina Aguilera, and deeply attached to a Y2K hyperfeminine sensibility. Yet the Miu Miu collection is filled with looks that also reference drab menswear: khaki coats, loafer shoes, and ill-fitting blue dress shirts. This blending of aggressively boring menswear and hyperfeminine silhouettes allowed the collection to exist at a cross-section between fashion and irony, dullness and sexiness, and menswear and womenswear. Katie and I talked about seeing hundreds of *TikTok* videos about the collection days after its debut. Everyone was talking about it—some hated it, some loved it, others feared the rise of low-waisted garments. It wasn't long until the collection started appearing on the covers of magazines, on influencers, and on celebrities like Zendaya, Naomi Campbell, Paloma Elsesser, Nicole Kidman, Emma Corrin, and Hailey Bieber. The trend was written about by publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Cut*, *V Magazine*, and *Marie Claire*, and then received its own *Instagram* account called @miumiuset, which is dedicated to spotting the collection in action and tracking its global influence. Then the Miu Miu skirt set trickled down.

Micro-miniskirts are now one of the most popular items among fast-fashion retailers. A *Google* search for "micro-miniskirt" yields tens of millions of results. One can purchase an exact dupe from thousands of retailers, and on *TikTok* there are hundreds

of videos of people DIY-ing their own versions. While Miu Miu skirt sets and their imitations have now created countless jobs and generated millions in sales, the skirt sets are also responsible for an abundance of waste, emissions, and used liters of water. Given that they are a microtrend, many of them will also likely end up in landfills soon. Yet Katie and I couldn't stop talking about our love for the collection: her favorite moment when Lorde wore it; mine when two men modeled it in *Têtu* magazine. At that moment we had a shared language: a love for something we would likely never put on our bodies.

Perhaps my heart will skip a beat when, in a few months (or more likely years), I spot an original piece from Miu Miu's Spring 2022 ready-to-wear collection on *The RealReal*. Maybe at that moment, it will feel as though the many hours I've spent on *The RealReal* weren't entirely useless, and by purchasing this article of clothing, I might finally satisfy the desire that keeps me checking in every morning at ten. However, I know this will likely not be the case – my serial browsing habit will probably continue until the day I drop. Yet I also recognize that my consumption habits are rooted in joy, that scrolling or talking about something as inconsequential as a skirt can bring me a real sense of exhilaration. Despite all the marketing, merchandising, and problems with consumption, an unexplainable personal relationship exists between particularly attractive garments – their histories, aesthetics, and designs – and me. That may sound a little crazy, but it's what allows countless people to connect online over their love of fashion. Even if the excitement is a symptom of late-stage capitalism, it's real.

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