

Buy Better, Buy Less, Feel Smug About It

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By Isabel Cristo

Ms. Cristo writes about style and gender.



Credit: Leonie Bos

I love shopping and I also generally try to be a good person. I'm often tormented by the nagging feeling that these two impulses are in conflict with each other. The damage wrought by the global fashion industry — on both the planet and the people it employs — is well documented and widely understood. On top of all that, as a rule, I object to the principles of unfettered consumption and capitalist visions of eternal growth. For a long time, I thought I could mitigate my own participation by shopping almost exclusively secondhand. This approach was less expensive and seemed to offer a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card: When I took a chance on a shirt with a rounded collar instead of a pointed one, just to see if I could be the kind of person who wears a rounded collar shirt, and it turned out that no, I can't be that kind of person, I could always sell the shirt right back to another thrift store and do it all over again, bypassing landfills the whole time.

Then resale and vintage shopping exploded in popularity — prices shot up, my favorite stores became overrun with the same Zara blouses that everyone else had (now with some pilling), and the good stuff was gone in the blink of an eye. But I still needed my fix! I was back at square one.

To my relief, a new framework emerged: "good quality." Online, I watched personal-style influencers peddling capsule wardrobes or their latest hauls invoke the "really good quality" of a "piece" like an incantation meant to ward off the specter of overconsumption. I found a thriving ecosystem of content wholly devoted to stitch counts, seams and fabric compositions. Armed with my newfound rationale, I gravitated to brands that predated the explosion of fast fashion (Ralph Lauren crewnecks, silk Armani shirts, mostly-defunct in-house department store lines), as well as independent labels where I shelled out more money, comforted by the knowledge that the boots would last me forever. Far from curbing my spending, I had launched into a whole new marketplace full of beautiful things to buy.

"Quality" has become a sort of overarching sign of good taste, capturing at once the enduring popularity of the resale market, the looming possibility of a recession, prevailing minimalist aesthetics, the environmental and human costs of commercial production and the frenetic retail cycle. I'm the first to insist that it's good to be discerning, to buy less and buy better. But "quality" alone can't carry the cultural weight of all that we — and I — as consumers have foisted upon it, no matter how strong the hand-sewn backstitch. If we're not vigilant, "quality" risks becoming a trend in itself, just as meaningless a concept as the "old money aesthetic," "the clean girl"¹ or "quiet luxury."

High-quality things have always conferred status on their owner. Traditionally, quality and luxury were paired: High prices came with the promise of high standards. You paid more, and got better fabrics and craftsmanship. But today, you can buy garbage at every price point. Raw material and labor costs have surged, and many luxury brands appear to be cutting corners to sustain their profit margins. When Vogue Business conducted an online survey of luxury shoppers last year, almost half of those who had reduced their spending

¹ The clean girl aesthetic: dewy-skinned girls with the slicked back bun and tiny hoop earrings making their way to the gym with a body-sized Stanley Cup and pulled-up sports socks over yoga leggings.
<https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/clean-girl-aesthetic-trend>

40 cited a decline in quality for the price. Then there's the trend cycle. Faced with the unrelenting churn of micro trends and new clothes made cheaply, many people choose to opt out, putting a premium instead on "timelessness" and "longevity."

45 And social media makes the fashion industry's failings visible on a huge scale. In September, the Italian fashion house Miu Miu suffered a minor public relations crisis when the model Wisdom Kaye complained on TikTok after an \$18,000 spree at the recently anointed "coolest brand in the world." In disbelief, he showed his 14 million followers how a button had snapped off a denim vest and a zipper had cracked off a sweater within minutes of his getting home from the store — the pink tissue paper and shopping bag were still strewn on the floor. After the video went viral, the brand sent him replacements for the broken garments, he said; viewers watched as yet another button popped off yet another vest like a champagne cork.

50 Defective hardware is one thing, but on the whole, the markers of shoddy construction are largely invisible to untrained eyes. Lucky for us, there are now scores of content creators ready to demystify the more technical aspects of design and manufacturing. The author Andrea Cheong runs a TikTok account where you can learn about saddle shoulders, bias tape, untrimmed threads, French seams and fiber length. Another creator deconstructs luxury handbags — literally rips them apart with what looks like hunting shears — to do a full 55 autopsy of their craftsmanship, or lack thereof. "Is it worth it?" he intones over the carcass of a Loewe Puzzle bag. (Answer: Sort of.) In men's wear, where suiting, technical performance wear and the military serve as major reference points, you'll find no shortage of clothing nerds who want to expound on underarm joining and double needle stitching.

60 This if-you-know-you-know approach comes naturally for enthusiasts who are already primed to read clothes as a kind of text and not only as decorative objects. Where some of us might see a skirt, might even notice that it's knee length, pleasantly gauzy, in a nondescript taupe-y color, others will look at it and see 1999 Prada. Clothes are already a repository of codes and invisible languages. Quality lends one more layer of intellectualism to the project of getting 65 dressed, just one more dialect with which to communicate your good taste.

70 In the 1980s, the proliferation of fast food chains sparked a backlash known as the slow food movement, which tried to take on the ecological, economic and human damage wrought by industrial mass food production. But without a regulatory structure to ensure the availability and affordability of, say, fresh produce, the movement manifested less as a transformative overhaul and more as a new frontier of class distinction. While many suffered food deserts, social elites patronized gorgeous wood-paneled restaurants and expensive specialty grocery stores, buoyed by the knowledge that their habits were morally, as well as nutritionally, superior.

75 Today, new paradigms of consumption are pushing tastemakers toward a sort of farm-to-table fashion. But the more time you spend on the internet, the more you start to sense a nagging irony: "Quality" might just exist in the eye of the beholder. How do we judge the caliber of a 100 percent mohair scarf from a brand that's faced repeated allegations of systemic worker abuse? Or a sweater that lists the name of its weaver on its label but is prohibitively expensive?

80 Still, many, many people make a living trying to sell us things. And we want to buy — or at
least I do. For the conscious shopper, “quality” becomes a new permission structure to
soothe our shopaholic souls, joining the ranks of women-owned businesses, American
made, small batch and fair trade. Buying innumerable items of clothing is, on its face,
essentially indefensible, but buying something of “high quality” is virtuous, noble, ethical. It’s
85 an “investment.” It wasn’t always the case that brands would brag about the factory origins of
their buttons, but as consumers navigate the onslaught of things we *could* buy, quality has
become the latest marketing tool to instruct us on what we *should* buy.

With clothes, as with food, the underlying principles of sustainability and slowness are
essentially unimpeachable. We all deserve things that last and that nourish us. Still, as we
90 enter our annual holiday season bacchanalia of shopping, it’s worth remembering that the
comparisons to food get us only so far. Technically speaking, unlike with food, I do not need
that perfectly slouchy pair of trousers in order to live. I do not need that perfectly slouchy pair
of wool trousers in a gorgeous steely gray from the indie e-commerce brand with the
personable founder in order to stay alive, no matter how much it might feel that way, no
95 matter how they would fill the hole in my closet that might as well be a hole in my heart.
Right?