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My Obsession With Knock-Offs Was About More Than Fashion

03.13.2019
BY EMMA GRADY



My first New York stop was always Canal Street, where I went to stock up on fake designer wares. A logo-printed Louis Vuitton bag, a nylon Prada, plastic Chanel earrings. When I returned to school in snowy Vermont, they were my armor. With a Louis slung over my shoulder, my giant puffy coat from Walmart suddenly seemed cooler.

One night while wearing it, I recall overhearing a rich blonde whisper to her friends, "Oh look, I have the same one." I was half scared of being found out, half happy I passed as someone who could afford a \$1,230 bag. The paint chipped at the edges eventually, but that Louis lasted a few years. The Prada ripped at the seams, but I used safety pins to put it back together and, whenever I opened it, you could see them, shiny and pointy. I stabbed myself a few times when they came undone, but the drops of blood were worth the logo.



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My love for all things designer started long before then. I grew up in a small town on the coast of Maine, where the closest I got to high fashion was through the shiny pages of *Vanity Fair*, *Teen Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*—and *Abercrombie & Fitch* at the local mall. I was attracted to all things related to the city, and so it only seemed natural that my new college friends hailed from New York. They introduced me to cobblers (who knew you could get shoes repaired?), designer jeans (who knew you could tell the brand by the back pocket?), and Canal Street, where I added a pair of knockoff *Sevens* (yes, they really make faux pairs) and a fake *Chloé* bag to my collection.

Fakes, which lack the craftsmanship the real things are revered for in the first place, come with the anxiety of being found out. And yet, they held my allure. Getting faux designer duds felt like cheating on a test and getting straight As—I was part of an elite club without the credentials.

After college, I moved into my cousin's big house on a hill in Rhode Island for the summer. She had an entire room dedicated to expensive designer clothes, fur coats and leather bags. I was in heaven. At the end of the season, I promptly swapped out my fakes for her *Fendi* bag and high-tailed it to New York in her white fur coat. I didn't believe in myself, but I believed in the bag; I needed something to mask my fear, insecurity, and anxiety—and it was just the ticket.

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I hid under that bag just like I hid under layers of caked-on makeup, fake tanner, long hair and costume jewelry. I wanted to be seen yet unseen. My self-hatred ran so deep I disliked anything that was mine or associated with me. I felt more comfortable, instead, in other people's clothes—as if their normalcy would somehow rub off on me. I clung to the idea that appearing a certain way would fix me.



Looking back, my obsession with fakes made sense, because I, myself, felt like a fraud. I wanted to take the shortcut—to be thin without being healthy, to find a partner without looking, to have a successful career without doing the work. Time was cruel to this approach, because it wasn't long before my quick-fixes revealed themselves as utterly flawed. It was an uncomfortable reckoning, but one that ultimately led me towards becoming the person I wanted to be—the one who learned to take care of her body, say "yes" to dating, stay at work late to get the job done.

It took time, but slowly my lust for something fake was usurped by a thirst for something real: I wanted real confidence, real self-esteem, real self-respect, even if they sounded ridiculously out of reach. For the first time in my life, I wanted to be completely me—whoever that person was, whoever she could be — and with that, my interest in fakes disappeared into thin air.

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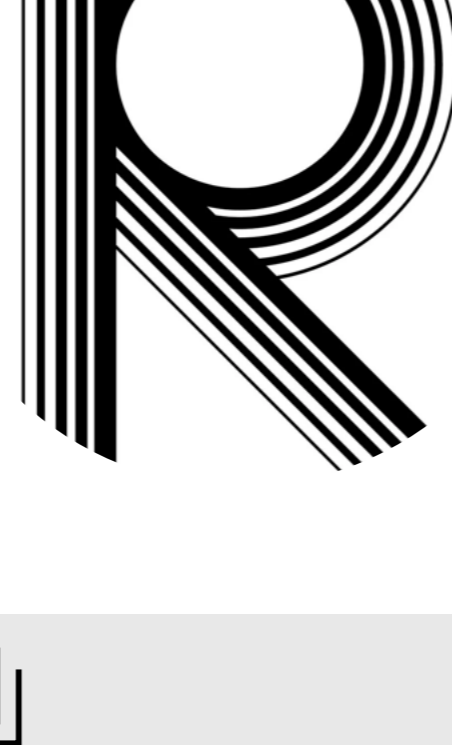
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I still love a nice coat and a designer bag, but the difference now is I no longer depend on them to provide me with what I lack. I've found amazing pieces at vintage and secondhand stores to mix in with the rest of my closet—a quilted leather *Fendi*, printed *Dolce & Gabbana* pants, a *Dior* saddlebag—and while I still get a twinge of excitement knowing I can dress the way I want without the price tag, my love for high-end fashion is now rooted in a reverence for the craftsmanship, and less about the status the logos imply.

I don't regret my fake bag obsession — I needed it at the time. But the designer labels only had power because I gave them power. A couple months ago, when I reminded my cousin of the *Fendi* I borrowed from her, she replied, "You know that was fake, right?"

Photos by Jay L. Clendenin, Patrick McMullan, Gerard Julien, and Chris Moore via Getty Images.



Emma Grady



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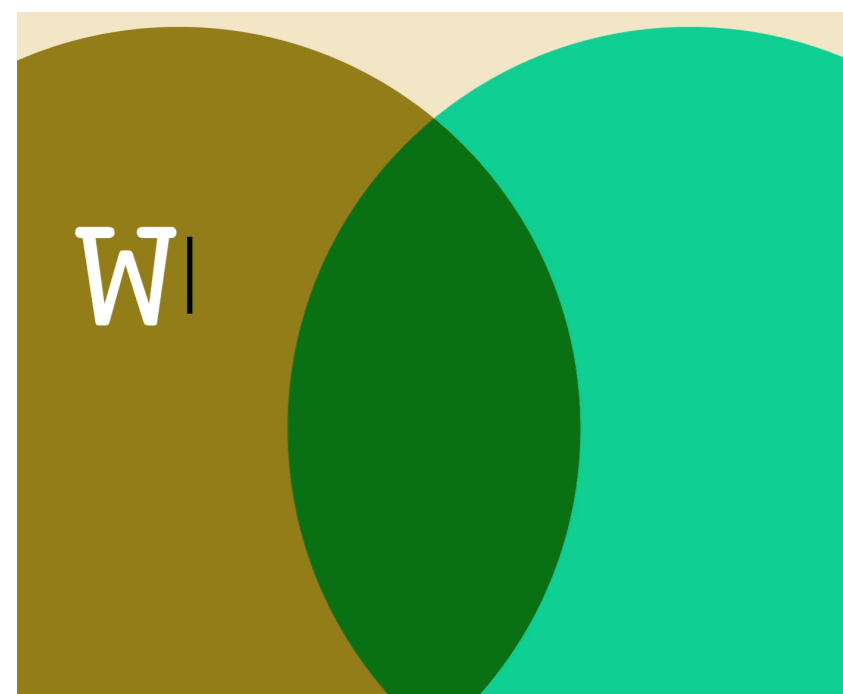
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The name dropping of the designer pieces found at second hand stores at the end of the article makes the whole lesson learned feel somehow hollow.

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The last line of this absolutely made it for me.

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Casey Pechan · 2 years ago
"I felt more comfortable, instead, in other people's clothes—as if their normalcy would somehow rub off on me. I clung to the idea that appearing a certain way would fix me." SO well written. And also me in middle school when I moved to a new town and felt like everyone was cooler, more comfortable, and better connected than I was.

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Lyrel · 2 years ago
Aww I think this is a great wonderful story on self discovery and I really enjoyed reading it! I feel like I can definitely relate because everytime I step outside, I get on this persona of someone thats ambitious but also elegant in perfect clothes, hair, and makeup but it's really just to fool others, and myself as well. I hope I can gain the something real in my life like you have. Anyways, loved the story and I hope you have a nice day!

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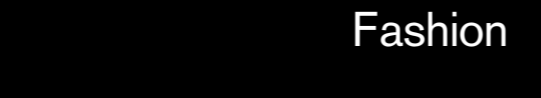
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