Chapter 1

The Smartphone
And Its Killer App, Social Media

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The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed.
—William Gibson

From the Outside Looking in: Nigeria, November 2022

It was my first time in Africa, and the sun was hot on my skin. This was the closest I'd ever been to the equator, and I was used to a different latitude. Standing on the airport tarmac at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, I was already sticky from the heat. The sky was blue and relatively cloudless, and palm trees lined the streets. I had flown more than seventeen hours on two connecting flights to attend GTCO Fashion Weekend, an event hosted by Guaranty Trust Bank, one of Nigeria's most prominent multinational financial institutions.

Founded in 2016, GTCO Fashion Weekend is a consumer-focused fair and business platform designed to showcase the best of Africa's fashion to a global audience. The event includes master classes taught by international fashion industry experts. For their 2022 edition, the organizers invited me to give a talk on the key technologies transforming the future of fashion.

It was more than an hour's drive from the airport to Victoria Island and the Wheatbaker Hotel, which would be my home for the next few days. As we slowed through traffic, dozens of street vendors with portable stands weaved between the moving cars, selling everything from corn on the cob to phone cables. Nigeria was the only place I'd ever visited where you could buy almost anything in gridlock. Along the roadside, merchants cooked hot meals in large pots over open flames and sold them to pedestrian passersby for 300 naira (about thirty-four cents).

For Nigerians, selling is a way of life. Street vending accounts for over 70% of urban employment in Nigeria,[1] and there are 42 million small and medium enterprises, accounting for 90% of businesses in the region.[2] The country is still dominated by cash, but that's quickly changing. According to the McKinsey Global Payments Map, Nigeria is expected to experience significant growth in mobile payments in the coming years.

My chaperone was a young woman named Tolu Aribisala. In addition to being a part-time fashion designer and influencer, she was also the brand and communications manager for Squad, a payment solutions subsidiary of the bank. Squad offers entrepreneurs the digital tools to start and grow their businesses, like payment links and point-of-sale solutions for accepting mobile money transfers. Squad's North American counterpart would be Square, a startup founded in San Francisco in 2009 by Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter. Dorsey came up with the idea for Square when his friend, a glassblower, lost out on an art sale because he couldn't accept payment via credit card. That's when Dorsey and his co-founder, Jim McKelvey, developed a credit card reader that plugged into the audio jack of mobile devices. Square enabled merchants of every size to turn their smartphones into a point-of-sale system. Dorsey was one of the first entrepreneurs whose ventures linked real-time connection,

social media, and the need for mobile payment solutions. Squad, like Square, is an enabling technology that makes digital payments reliable, secure, and affordable to sellers of all kinds.

"What the PC was for the advanced world, the mobile phone became for Africa," Adeyemi Atanda tells me.[3] He's a digital payment strategist based in Nigeria and the chief marketing officer for Squad. Ten years ago, he says, mobile payments were SMS-based and accounted for 2–5% of small-ticket transactions. Today, about 70–80% of transactions are mobile-based.

After we'd settled into the hotel, my driver took me to the venue where I would deliver my talk the following day. It was in a neighborhood called Oniru, which consists of a mix of residential and commercial buildings bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. At first I was struck by the building's size. I was accustomed to fashion conferences in Toronto or San Francisco, with fifty or a few hundred people in attendance. GTCO Fashion Weekend would host more than 250,000 visitors from 13 different countries over two days. The scale makes sense, considering Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and Lagos alone is home to more than 15 million people. By comparison, that's about twice the population of New York packed into a city the size of Rhode Island.

On opening day for GTCO Fashion Weekend, the buzz was palpable. There were just as many people outside the official venue as inside. Influencers posed for photos on the large lot outside the site, while vloggers spoke with attendees in street-style interviews. Women wore their Sunday best; one on-camera personality donned a bright orange asymmetric dress with a matching fascinator. A crew of young men all flaunted their own personal style; one of them wore black overalls so low they exposed his nipples, which were covered with black tape to create an X-mark over them, like homemade pasties. In contrast, one of his friends wore a three-piece suit, even

though it was more than 90 degrees Fahrenheit outside. Everyone was young and full of life (in fact, 70% of the population in Nigeria is under the age of 30).

A shopper at heart, I delighted in browsing the rows of retail exhibitions. GTCO Fashion Weekend was just as much a marketplace as a business conference, with hundreds of vendors selling everything from dresses and accessories to hair and fabric. There were feathers, sequins, and neon—sometimes all on the same dress. I felt as if Nigerian clothes might be a bit flashy for my liking, but perhaps that's because I was so steeped in the normcore[4] that had taken over North American fashion. I'd soon learn that Nigerian style is a lot like Nigerian food: spicy and not at all boring.

Every vendor I spoke with told me Instagram is the number-one technology transforming their business. Although the social media application launched in Nigeria in 2010, it didn't take off until a few years later when it was rolled out on Android, which is much more widely used in West Africa.[5] While internet penetration has been slower in Nigeria compared to North America, the country has experienced hockey stick growth in the past twenty years, especially with the introduction of 5G in the latter half of 2022, which happened to be right when I was visiting.

This would explain why visiting Nigeria in 2022 was like stepping back in time and revisiting North America in the early 2010s: Influencer culture was on the rise, and social media was opening up new revenue opportunities for entrepreneurs and enterprises. Small shops were now digital storefronts, launching Nigerian businesses from marketplace setups to global e-commerce startups. It was an up-close look at the impact of an emerging technology on society, but now I was seeing it as an outsider looking in, and this time it was on a scale I'd never seen before.

Like the rest of the world, Nigeria experienced a boom in electronic payments in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with online

commerce growing 40% during lockdowns.[6] Now it was on the brink of something else entirely, with a new generation of socially savvy entrepreneurs coming up who were keen, confident, and more connected than ever before.

How Technologies Change Us: An Information Renaissance

The introduction of new technologies profoundly impacts a society—impacts that often can't be fully measured and accounted for until years, sometimes decades later. As American historian Elizabeth Eisenstein points out, when the printing press was first introduced in the mid-fifteenth century, the transition from script to print allowed knowledge and ideas to spread faster than ever before.[7] As a result, literacy rates increased, as did critiques of the Catholic church. The printing press enabled the publishing of maps, which fostered travel and exploration. It was responsible for the Renaissance, the European cultural movement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that marked the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity. In many ways, the printing press laid the foundation for the modern information society as we know it.

Similarly, the introduction of televisions in the homes of North Americans in the 1960s changed how information was disseminated. News broadcasting, documentaries, public education programs, celebrity culture, and commercial advertising would not have been possible without the television. It became the cornerstone of popular culture, political debate, and public opinion. As educator Neil Postman highlights in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*[8] television and a predominately visual culture turned everything, including politics, into entertainment. For example, Nixon lost the 1960 presidential race to John F. Kennedy largely *because the*

presidential debates were televised; Kennedy appeared confident and charismatic, while Nixon was sweaty and pale. The visual contrast impacted the public perception of the potential leaders, and Kennedy won.

As Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhan has pointed out, the medium is often the *massage*—meaning communication tools often shape (or *massage*) what's being said.

When the history books are written about my generation (I'm a millennial) and the generations that follow, the defining feature will be the smartphone and its killer app, social media. Together, they are my generation's printing press and television; together, they have informed our culture and shaped its content.

Although IBM invented the smartphone in 1992, it wasn't connected to an actual 3G network until 2000. In 2007, Apple introduced its first iPhone, a device that would radically shape the world as we know it. Today, smartphones are ubiquitous. Globally, almost 90% of cellular phones are smartphones, and as of 2016, there are more smartphone subscribers than people.

The impact of the smartphone on the fashion industry is manifold. First, there's the physicality of a device that brings the camera into what was once a closed and opaque industry, a development that forced the fashion industry to open up. At the same time, there's the trend of converting services and tools into mobile web applications, a phenomenon referred to as "appification." We'll talk about the importance of the camera's presence before delving into the impact of apps. Both have to do with the way fashion is presented and consumed.

How the Camera Broke Down Fashion's Fourth Wall

Along with the smartphone came the ubiquity and portability of the camera and the ability to capture and send images worldwide in

seconds. The first commercial phone to include a camera was the Kyocera Visual Phone VP-210. Released in 1999, had a 0.11-megapixel camera and could take up to twenty pictures before its onboard storage was full. The following year, in 2000, both Samsung and Sharp released phones with cameras. It wasn't until 2007, when Apple released the first iPhone that cameras became standard on smartphones. Although the first iPhone only had a two-megapixel camera, the camera quality would improve over the years as lenses and sensors became miniaturized, more affordable, and more readily available.

How did the smartphone camera impact fashion? Consider the two images: in QR Code 3.



QR Code 3 Scan to see an image of Fashion Press Week from 1943.

This is an image of the first official Fashion Week in New York in 1943. Although there were undoubtedly fashion gatherings and even shows in Europe prior, the first official fashion week was called "Press Week," and it was created to showcase designers to fashion journalists who could not travel to Paris due to World War II. Fashion Week was once an industry-only event for editors, journalists, and buyers. The only people in attendance with cameras were the photographers, and they would sit in the designated media pit at the end of the runway to capture images for newspapers and magazines to print. Now consider a second image (QR Code 4).



QR Code 4 Scan to see an image of Gigi Hadid walking for Tommy Hilfiger in 2016.

The second image shows Gigi Hadid walking the runway for Tommy Hilfiger in 2016. The first thing you notice is all the smartphones. In the first image, everyone is watching the show. In the second image, seventy years later, everyone is watching the show *through their smartphone*, capturing the moment with their camera.

The smartphone camera has augmented the runway and extended it beyond the confines of Fashion Week. It used to take days before magazines and newspapers printed photographs from fashion events for circulation; Today, runway shows are livestreamed and images and videos captured at Fashion Weeks are shared instantly.

It wasn't just consumers who were let in via the camera's lens. Brands like Zara grew in popularity because the company was able to take inspiration from the runway and quickly manufacture similar-looking items for a fraction of the cost. The ethics of these "dupes"[9] have long been scrutinized, but Zara's growing success has been a direct result of more consumers wanting access to trendy pieces. We'll talk more about Zara in Chapter 3, but for now, it's important to note how the smartphone camera enabled (and accelerated) fast fashion.

In his final runway presentation before his suicide, legendary designer Alexander McQueen anticipated the pervasiveness of the

camera's presence and its impact on fashion. McQueen's last show, Plato's Atlantis, was one of the first presentations livestreamed online in high definition for internet audiences (QR Code 5). It was an otherworldly and intergalactic presentation. Face prosthetics were used to make models look like aliens. Two robot-mounted cameras on dual tracks ran up and down the runway. Throughout the show, the cameras seemingly tracked the models and cast footage of them in real time from the runway onto a video screen. The size of the cameras dwarfed the models, and the equipment's dark, bulky presence contrasted strikingly with the ethereal dresses.

QR Code 5 Scan the QR code to watch McQueen's spring/summer 2010 runway presentation Plato's Atlantis.

At the show's close, as all the models came out for their final walk to the tune of Lady Gaga's song "Bad Romance," the cameras panned over the audience, as if gesturing to them as an integral part of the show. McQueen had broken the fourth wall and was pointing to the ever-important presence of the audience—both the physical audience in attendance and the wider audience let in via the camera lens.

With each model who walked the runway, more prosthetics were used, as if to show a transformation from recognizable people to otherworldly creatures. "It's some sort of evolution," said Peter Philips, one of the makeup artists for the show.[10] "The last fifteen girls

start to transform into creatures with applications and special-effect makeup," he said in a backstage interview with FashionTV.

In a conversation with Nick Knight, McQueen talked about the decision to livestream the show. "Fashion is a very small world, especially the professional part of the world," he said.[11] McQueen goes on to say that he didn't want to pigeonhole himself, and that design as an artform can only develop when it's opened up to a larger audience.

The camera was the tool that let in a wider audience, and it broke down the barrier separating the fashion industry from its spectators, recognizing consumers not just as observers but as characters in the narrative.

The smartphone also paved the way for the appification of social networks. Facebook, which was once the dominant social network in terms of usage and popularity,[12] was originally designed for desktop and offered a less than compelling mobile app. When Instagram was released in 2010, it was designed for the small screen, prioritizing a simple user interface and touch interactions. This made it a quick rival to Facebook. Shortly after its launch, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, made a bid to buy Instagram for a record-setting $1 billion. The acquisition was about combating social media rivals at the time and about boosting Facebook's strategy on mobile.[13]

Instagram was one of the first American tech giants to focus on images first. The icon for the original Instagram app was itself a version of a Polaroid, a camera traditionally used for capturing and printing a moment in time. Instagram did the same thing, only it used the smartphone camera for capturing the moment and the social feed for "printing" it.

What differentiated Instagram from other image-sharing platforms like Flickr was the robust social graph. Instagram prioritized a network of social connections on your feed, which showed images from people you were following, and a news section, which displayed interactions between those in your network.

Since the introduction of Instagram, runway shows have become increasingly aware of—and have pandered to—the social camera. Fashion Week has transformed from an industry-only event to a live entertainment extravaganza for public consumption. Brands like Tommy Hilfiger and Rebecca Minkoff lean into the theatrics of fashion shows and orchestrate moments seemingly made for social media virality. Runway shows have featured Ferris wheels, lobster rolls, temporary tattoo parlors, and celebrity musical performers. On the stranger side, catwalks have included faux baby dragons and models carrying wax replicas of their heads—I'm looking at you, Gucci. What's become apparent in the last decade is that fashion shows are no longer just for buyers and decision-makers; they're for celebrities, influencers, and their followers. As journalist and fashion critic Suzy Menkes wrote in 2016, "Fashion shows are aimed at the people, not the pros."[14]

Viral Fashion: Social Media and "the Dress"

When the capabilities of the camera combined with the reach of social media, unprecedented things started to happen, including the phenomenon of viral content. The notion of virality as we know it today was born in the social media era. Before the 1970s, the term "viral" was only used to describe infectious diseases. During the computer boom starting in the 1970s, "virality" had the connotation of a virus. The term "going viral" wasn't used in print until 1999.

With the invention of platforms with image-sharing capabilities like Facebook (launched in 2004), Tumblr (2007), and Pinterest (2009), images had a place to end up aside from your family photo album. The social feed—a stream of content including updates from friends, family, and pages that each user follows—quickly became an integral part of everyday news consumption. Platforms like Facebook encourage interaction by prompting users to like, comment, and share. If enough people share something, it "goes viral."

One dress in particular achieved virality in the early days of social media, and that was due to the controversial nature of its image. In February 2015, Cecilia Bleasdale was shopping at Cheshire Oaks Designer Outlet in Chester, England. She was looking for something to wear to her daughter's wedding and took a photo of a bodycon dress she was considering for the event and sent it to the bride-to-be (QR Code 6).



QR Code 6 Scan QR code to see the original image of "the dress."

The dress was blue with black lace, but upon receiving an image of the dress, the daughter said she perceived it as white with gold lace. The two went back and forth and were perplexed by one another's perception. They decided to post the image of the dress on Facebook to get other people's opinions. To their surprise, friends and family disagreed: some saw the dress as white with gold, while others saw it as blue and black. A few days after the wedding, a friend of the newlyweds posted the image of the dress to Tumblr asking people what color they thought it was. The post received thousands of comments and caught the attention of an editor at *BuzzFeed*, who then posted an article about the dress with a poll asking readers what color they saw. The page set a record for the online publication in terms of traffic to the site. Soon the image ended up on Twitter with celebrities including Taylor Swift weighing in. Within a week, more than ten million tweets

had mentioned #TheDress, and the story had appeared on hundreds of news programs. It received so much attention that Bleasdale and her family were invited on *The Ellen Show* to share the whole story.

The appearance of the dress as blue and black or white and gold has since been accounted for by neuroscientists: Your perception of color depends on how your brain interprets the light in the image.

What's interesting for our purposes is the virality of the image of #TheDress and how it reflects the way fashion has become a hyper-social conversation. Anyone with an internet connection can weigh in with their optical opinions.

The impact of social media on fashion as a cultural conversation can especially be observed during red-carpet events like the Met Gala and the Oscars. As celebrities appear on TV screens, we also turn to platforms like X (formerly Twitter) to provide and read commentary about the event in real time, a phenomenon known as "the second screen." Public opinion—something that was once much more abstract—can now be measured. Software platforms monitoring online conversations quantify sentiments and can tell us exactly what everyone thought of Sarah Jessica Parker's hat, or how people felt about Zendaya's outfit change. This practice of real-time social listening provides brands with more insights into the customer's mindset than ever before. For example, tools like Brandwatch and Semrush help marketing teams monitor audience behavior and sentiment so they can adjust their strategies in real time as needed.

The Appification of Commerce

The smartphone also put commerce at everyone's fingertips, making it easier than ever for people to browse, research, and order items online from anywhere.

Appification represents the rapid movement of digital tools and media from web-based platforms to mobile apps.[15] Mobile commerce

(m-commerce, essentially shopping from your smartphone) is on the rise, and quickly becoming the shopping channel of choice. In 2023, retail m-commerce sales in the United States hit $491 billion.[16] According to Statista, mobile commerce will account for more than 60% of all global retail e-commerce by 2028.[17]

With the launch of Apple's app store in 2008, marketplaces, starting with Amazon, eBay, and Etsy, began releasing mobile apps that enabled users to search and shop for products. The Google Play Store launched four years later, the official app store for Android users. The growing number of smartphones and 4G along with LTE (Long-Term Evolution) technology made mobile browsing fast and easy. Loyalty programs, such as the Starbucks Rewards Program, could be integrated into apps, combining personalization and payment.

Today, every major retailer from IKEA to Walmart to Sephora has their own app, making mobile shopping easier than ever before. Apps from brands like Zara, ASOS, Uniqlo, and H&M simplify browsing, purchasing, and tracking orders from anywhere, which has transformed the way consumers interact with fashion retailers. As a result, shopping experiences have become more personalized based on user's preferences, past purchases, and browsing history.

The practice of picking up your phone and ordering more socks or underwear on Amazon may seem commonplace today, but it wasn't that long ago when your only option was to go to the store and purchase items in person. The department store, once a mecca for modern retail, has been displaced by the Amazon app. After all, why go to the department store *when the department store can come to you*? The result has been a decline in physical retail and the rise of consumer expectations, a phenomenon known as the Amazon Effect.

In a world where Amazon looms large (the company has a market capitalization of $2.30 trillion), same-day or next-day shipping has become the standard for many people in and around large cities.

Recent reports into Amazon's labor practices have revealed there's a human cost to achieving lightning-fast delivery speeds.[18]

Because of Amazon, consumers also expect to be able to return items for free. Returns from Amazon generate 6 billion pounds of landfill waste per year, and 16 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions, according to Tobin Moore, CEO of returns solution provider Optoro.[19] A 2021 investigation found that Amazon destroys millions of unsold items every year—products that are often new and unused.[20]

More recently, apps like Chinese-owned Temu have dominated the mobile commerce space and opened shoppers up to a global market. On Temu, you can buy anything from electric scooters to lingerie to miniature furniture for dollhouses. The app is an endless virtual aisle of affordable necessities (a five-pack of seamless underwear for $10.63) to novelties (a 70-inch pepperoni pizza blanket for $5.99). According to reporting from *Business Insider,* Temu was the most downloaded app in the first ten months of 2024. Temu's parent company, PDD Holdings, reported $13.4 billion in revenue for Q2 of that year.[21]

Apps have created mini-ecosystems where brands connect directly with consumers, which makes them a valuable asset for blending commerce, community, and convenience. For example, Nike's SNKRS app is a gateway to exploring and purchasing Nike sneakers, especially when it comes to limited-edition items and exclusive releases. Launched in 2015, the SNKRS app is a go-to place for shoe enthusiasts (known as sneakerheads). In addition to featuring items for sale, the app also showcases photos of Nike customers wearing their kicks. Nike leverages data from the app to better understand and cater to its customers. For example, the brand looked at its most engaged app users in New York. When they discovered that many were from Dominican neighborhoods, the company went to speak with them. Based on these learnings, Nike created a campaign and a

shoe, the De Lo Mio Air Force 1. The brand worked with Dominican photographers to shoot Dominicans wearing the shoe. When the sneaker finally launched, it quickly sold out.[22] Nike's SNKRS app is just one example of how apps become ecosystems for commerce, content, and community.

Social Commerce, Peer-to-Peer Marketplaces, and Digital Thrifting

Another notable result of the convergence of cameras with social media and app ecosystems is the rise of social commerce—the practice of using social media platforms to market and sell products or services.[23] Social commerce bridges the gap between social interaction and shopping, seamlessly integrating commerce into the digital social experience.

Burberry is a prime example of a company that blends luxury fashion with social commerce. The brand posts shoppable content on Instagram and WeChat, the Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app.

Additionally, Burberry offers social media followers access to exclusive, behind-the-scenes content via livestreams that sometimes feature limited-edition offers. These events create urgency for shoppers and foster loyalty and community.

Apps have also introduced new consumption models, such as peer-to-peer commerce and recommerce. While these models existed before the smartphone, platforms like Facebook Marketplace have streamlined the process, making it easier for individuals to buy directly from one another instead of through traditional retailers.

Launched at the end of 2016, Facebook Marketplace is an online platform within Facebook that allows users to buy, sell, and trade items with others in their local community or beyond. According

to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, Facebook has 3.03 billion monthly active users, and up to 40% of these people shop on Marketplace.[24]

Apps for buying and selling secondhand clothing have also skyrocketed in recent years and catalyzed recommerce (short for "reverse commerce"). Although thrifting has been around since the late nineteenth century, digital thrifting is a new phenomenon powered by the internet. Digital thrifting is just like thrift shopping in real life, only the shopper is no longer limited to secondhand stores in their geographical area. This means there's more opportunity to browse and find items in your style and size at a fraction of the cost of buying new ones. Apps like Poshmark, Depop, and Vinted make it easy for people to buy and sell secondhand items directly to one another. Because these apps are integrated with social media features, they enhance user engagement and foster a community-driven marketplace. According to the Business of Apps, Depop has 4.2 million active buyers and 1.9 million active sellers.[25] The app generated $600 million in gross merchandise sales in 2023. In 2021, Depop was acquired by Etsy for $1.6 billion.

Although there are still downsides to thrift shopping online (namely, shipping costs and the inability to try items on), the business case is there. According to ThredUp's 2024 Resale Report, the global secondhand market will reach $350 billion by 2028, growing three times faster than the global apparel market.[26]

Some savvy thrifters have gone beyond just selling the items in their closets to curating virtual storefronts and becoming full-time resellers. Some sell items for friends and family and take a commission, while others shop for items at secondhand stores and relist them for more than they paid. In some cases, virtual store owners can make up to six figures reselling items. Sophia Amoruso, founder of Nasty Gal, got her start as a vintage reseller on eBay and grew

the brand's following on social media. Although the company would eventually file for bankruptcy due to leadership challenges, at its peak Nasty Gal was pulling in $100 million in annual sales.

Thrifting is a way of pushing back against consumer culture and promoting the circular economy, a model of production and consumption that involves keeping products and materials in use as long as possible. When thrifting is combined with digital ecosystems such as apps, the circular economy can flourish, opening up new revenue streams and unlocking value in old clothes.

While the smartphone has transformed how we transact, its killer app, social media, has also influenced what we shop for and how we discover trends and style inspiration.

The Clean Girl and the Mob Wife: The Smartphone's Impact on Trends

In January 2024, TikTok officially declared the clean girl aesthetic out, and the mob wife aesthetic in. For those unfamiliar with either of these terms, the "clean girl" is a look inspired by the likes of Hailey Bieber. It involves slicked-back buns, bushy eyebrows, and glossy lips and nails. The "mob wife" aesthetic is what it sounds like. Inspired by fictional characters like Carmela Soprano on the American drama series *The Sopranos,* the mob wife decks herself out in luxury (think fur jackets, heavy makeup with dark eyeliner, and lots of animal print and gold jewelry). By the time you're reading this, the internet will undoubtedly be onto something else.

If trends seem to be moving at breakneck speed compared to yesteryear, that's because they are. "Trends last anywhere from weeks to years," writes Joan Kennedy, the editorial director of *The Business of Fashion*.[27] Other sources, like consumer intelligence platform Brandwatch, suggest most trends have a peak that lasts about

two to four months. The twenty-year trend cycle, once a staple in fashion education, no longer seems relevant in the here-today, gone-tomorrow world of social media.

In her 2016 article "How Smartphones Are Killing Off the Fashion Show," *The New York Times* style editor Vanessa Friedman wrote about how the smartphone forced the industry into an existential crisis.[28] She quotes Scott Galloway, a professor of marketing and (at the time) the founder and chair of the digital consultancy L2: "Social media is the laxative of the fashion system. It makes everyone digest everything much faster," he said.

The speed at which trends move from introduction to decline is rewiring retail.

Until recently, fashion collections were previewed ahead of the season. Items shown on the runway in February were for the fall/winter of that year, while collections shown in September were for the spring/summer of the following year. The lead time from presentation to retail was approximately six months.

In reaction to social media's instantaneous nature, several brands—including Burberry, Tom Ford, Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Jacquemus, Mugler, and Rebecca Minkoff—tested a see-now, buy-now approach. This began circa 2016, when labels announced that items shown at Fashion Week would be available for purchase immediately in an attempt to be closer to the consumer. "The current way of showing a collection four months before it is available to customers is an antiquated idea, and one that no longer makes sense," Tom Ford told *The New York Times* in February 2016. However, more recently, brands have abandoned see-now, buy-now, or at least taken a seasonless or more hybrid approach. In 2020, Gucci announced it was opting for two shows a year, while brands like Moschino offer certain capsule items and accessories that are available immediately after the show, while other items adhere to the traditional production timeline.

The smartphone—and its killer app, social media—has also changed where trends come from. Gone are the days of the top-down model dramatized in the 2006 comedy-drama *The Devil Wears Prada,* where the editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), gives the frumpy fashion assistant Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) a lesson in trends in what has come to be known as the cerulean monologue (QR Code 7).



QR Code 7 Scan the QR code to watch the "cerulean monologue" from *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006).

Miranda Priestly's cerulean monologue may have been true in the 1990s or even early 2000s, but today, trends come from everywhere. "It's a shift away from the old trickle-down effect," says Kayla Marci, an analyst at retail intelligence platform.[29] The coquette aesthetic, for example, a micro-trend that describes an ultra-feminine, dainty way of dressing that incorporates bows, pastels, lace, and frills, started on Tumblr circa 2012–2017 (during Tumblr's golden era) and resurfaced in popularity on TikTok in recent years. Similarly, cottagecore, the aesthetic that harkens back to the days of *Little House on the Prairie*, popularized the nap dress, which became the must-have item of the summer circa 2020.[30]

Even Faster Fashion

As our media consumption has increased, so has our clothing consumption. The constant demand for newness has spawned a new type of fast fashion: *ultrafast* fashion. A segment of online-only retailers like Boohoo, Shein, Misguided, and Pretty Little Thing produce trends and micro-trends for quick consumption at bottom-of-the-barrel prices. "Ultra fast fashion takes everything harmful about fast fashion and speeds it up," writes JD Shadel on the *Good On You* blog.[31] Shadel notes how the "fashion haul" on TikTok has become a meme—a cultural behavior that spreads throughout the internet:

> When you scroll through fashion hauls, you see countless examples of consumption on steroids. In one typical video that's captioned *"*accidentally* spent $480 at #SHEIN,"* a TikToker unpacks big boxes and lays dozens of packaged garments out in her room, covering the floor.... "You're not going to believe me when I tell you how much I paid for these," she says as she holds her plastic-wrapped dresses, "cause it's insane—it was so cheap."

As if playing into trend-led purchasing behavior, Amazon released Haul in November 2024, a discount section of their app that offers selected items for under $20 USD. The interface is strikingly similar to the Chinese online marketplace Temu, and so is the emphasis on discounts: "Unbelievable finds, crazy low prices" a banner on Haul reads. A quick browse through the app and you'll notice you can find just about anything: RFID-blocking wallets or printed ties, each less than $5.

A 2021 study from the Royal Society of the Arts (known as RSA for short) determined that *half* of the fast fashion in the United Kingdom is plastic[32]—made from synthetic fibers such as polyester. While synthetics can offer some benefits such as stretch and durability, they're

a net negative for the environment. Synthetic fibers don't biodegrade and they shed microfibers (plastics) into the environment every time we wash them.

Ultra-fast fashion also contains chemicals that are not safe for the skin. The internet is riddled with testimonies of people who have had reactions—including rashes, hives, and even poisoning—to clothing, jewelry, and beauty products purchased from ultra-fast fashion retailers. An investigation by the CBC found that one in five items from Shein, AliExpress, or Zaful contained elevated levels of chemicals, including lead.[33]

In addition to the negative impacts on the environment and consumers, ultra-fast fashion is only possible by exploiting the cheap labor of women in developing economies. In Chapter 3, we'll talk about automation and, in particular, look at garment workers in Bangladesh to understand the nuances of industrialization and globalization. For now, it's crucial to recognize that there's a shady underbelly of producing trends at a lightning-fast pace.

Celebrities, Influencers, and Creators

In a 2006 special report on social media for *The Economist,* Jay Rosen wrote an article entitled "The People Formerly Known as the Audience,"[34] in which he discussed how smartphone and social media technologies allow a wider range of people to take part in gathering, filtering, and distributing news. In a 2018 lecture given at the University of Scranton by the same title, Dr. Rosen explained, "The tools of media production, which used to be in the hands of media companies are now distributed to the population at large, mainly through the smartphone."[35]

The camera has disrupted the relationship between traditional media and the fashion industry and upended the publisher–consumer dynamic: Newspapers and magazines, once both the gatekeepers

and the centerpiece of fashion, have been displaced by the newsfeed. As a result, the print media industry has been in steady decline since the introduction of the smartphone, with titles closing and layoffs announced frequently. The digital disruption of news isn't specific to fashion.

According to WordsRated, between 2019 and 2022, total audiences for magazine companies decreased by 38.56%,[36] and according to Brookings, an independent research organization, newspaper revenue dropped steadily, from $45 billion in 2007 to $22 billion in 2013.[37]

The smartphone has democratized the means of fashion media production, while at the same time, social media has opened up fashion media distribution. As a result, a new kind of entrepreneur has emerged at the intersection of media, technology, and fashion: the social media influencer.

While some may wince at the idea of influencing as a career choice, it's big business. According to Statista, companies are projected to spend more than $250 billion annually worldwide on social media advertising.[38] Influencer marketing—collaborating with influencers to promote products and services—has become a massive part of that spending.

Although the social media influencer is a relatively new phenomenon, there were always "it girls" in the past (think Audrey Hepburn, Edie Sedgwick, Twiggy, Marilyn Monroe, and even Clara Bow, the original "it girl" from the silent film era). The difference is that these women were always subjects in someone else's production. Sedgwick was primarily known as Andy Warhol's muse, while both Hepburn and Monroe only appeared in films directed by men. Today, because of the smartphone, the means of production are in the hands of the it girl, and that makes her more powerful than ever.

Kim Kardashian is one of the most popular influencers online. She got her start as a celebrity closet organizer and apprentice to Paris Hilton in the early 2000s before opening a clothing boutique,

called DASH, with her sisters. In 2007, Kim and her family started filming the reality TV series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. With the help of her ex-husband Ye (the artist formerly known as Kanye West), Kim became a style icon. In 2017, she founded KKW Beauty. Her first product line was a creme contour and highlight kit that let users recreate Kim's signature makeup look. The kits sold out immediately. In 2019, Kim founded Skims, a shapewear and clothing brand initially launched as Kimono Intimates. After backlash accused the brand of appropriating Japanese culture with its name, Kim changed it to Skims at the end of January 2021. Despite its controversial beginnings, Skim's initial launch was a huge success, with $2 million in profit and the company selling out of merchandise in ten minutes, according to Hypebae, an online site that chronicles the latest in fashion and streetwear.[39] In April 2021, *The New York Times* reported the company to be worth over $1.6 billion.[40] After further investments from hedge funds and investment firms, *Bloomberg* reported the value of Skims to be $3.2 billion in January 2022.[41] By comparison, the Calvin Klein brand, which has been around since 1968, is valued at only $1.5 billion.[42] In March 2022, *Time* magazine listed Skims as one of the "Most Influential Companies of the Year."[43]

Whereas celebrities of the past would lend their likeness to campaigns for fragrances, makeup, apparel, and more, Kim Kardashian sells her products directly to consumers. Although the D2C model has been around since mail-order catalogs in the late 1800s, social media exploded its potential and turned the social feed into a shoppable store window.

Similarly, Kylie Jenner, Kim's younger half-sister, leveraged the growing popularity of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* to build her personal brand and empire. She first appeared on the show as a gangly nine-year-old. At age fourteen, she collaborated with the apparel brand PacSun, to create a line of clothing with her sister Kendall. In 2015, she launched her makeup line, initially called Kylie Lip Kits

after its signature product. Although critics pointed out that Jenner's full pout came from lip fillers and not makeup, she used the controversy to her advantage. Her $29 lip kits sold out in under a minute. In 2016, Kylie Lip Kits was renamed Kylie Cosmetics and in 2019, *Forbes* magazine estimated Kylie's net worth as $1 billion and named her one of the world's youngest billionaires at age 21.[44] (*Forbes* has since struck Jenner from their list of billionaires, accusing the celebrity of inflating her net worth.[45]) In November 2019, Jenner sold a 51% controlling stake in her company to Coty, one of the world's largest multinational beauty companies, for $600 million.[46]

But it's not just children of wealthy parents who have made a name for themselves as influencers. When Aimee Song started blogging in 2008, she intended it to be a forum to share her interior design aesthetic. According to *The Business of Fashion,* Song was studying interior architecture in San Francisco when posts dedicated to what she was wearing sparked positive interest.[47] Song took the opportunity to launch a personal style blog, *Song of Style*. Sixteen years later, she has 7.3 million followers on Instagram and is one of the top-earning creators in the world.

Song, along with a wave of social media figures like Chiara Ferragni, Chriselle Lim, Leonie Hanne, and Camila Coelho, to name a few, leveraged image-sharing platforms like Instagram to carve out a new role in fashion that is neither industry insider nor outsider. This kind of storytelling and self-fashioning would not have been possible without the smartphone. Through these handheld devices, influencers like Song provide a window through which we can experience the fashion industry up close from the perspective of someone just like us.

It's important to note that the influencer doesn't necessarily look like the traditional fashion model. At five-foot-six and of Asian descent, Song stands out in a world where models are tall and white with sample-size measurements. Despite this, Song has sat in the

front row at runway shows all over the world, modeled for Dolce & Gabbana, and even collaborated with Mattel to make a Barbie that looks like her. She has launched her own clothing line with her sister, written two books, and has become an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Song is an example of how anyone with a sense of style, a smartphone, and an internet connection can participate in what's more widely known as the creator economy.

As *The New York Times* reporter and editor Christine Muhlke writes, "The creator economy is powered by millions of individuals who build and monetize their online celebrity by making deals with big brands and selling products to their followers."[48] According to Goldman Sachs, the creator economy could approach half a trillion dollars by 2027.[49] "The creator economy has taken over the entire [fashion] industry," Talita von Furstenberg, the co-chair of the fashion company Diane von Furstenberg, told the *Times*.[50]

For many, the creator economy is the gateway to entrepreneurship. Creators with modest followings compared to the Kardashians and even Song participate in brand deals where they get paid (in both money and gifts) to post products or attend events. Micro-influencers or nano-influencers (lesser-known influencers with between 1,000 and 100,000 followers) can have a dramatic effect on boosting awareness or sales for a brand. In fact, a recent report showed that micro-influencers yield an average return of more than $1,000 on a $50 investment, compared to influencers with more than 100,000 followers who command payments in the thousands but deliver a return of only $6,000.[51] In other words, although a micro-influencer's reach isn't as broad as mega celebrities or large influencers, their audiences can often be more targeted and engaged.

"We're in an era where traditional media no longer holds the monopoly on information dissemination," Hilary Gorbould said in an interview with the BBC.[52] Gorbould is an influencer marketing manager at Stockholm-based Redgert Comms. "Influencer marketing

allows brands to convey their message to a target demographic while hand-picking ambassadors who resonate with their ethos," she says. Creators help humanize corporate communications. While email marketing campaigns and advertisements come across as highly produced, creators can provide an authentic and accessible way to help share a brand story.

Creators aren't just flaunting their lifestyles and hawking products. Many have carved out unique roles for themselves within the industry. For example, Taylen Biggs is an eleven-year-old fashion host with millions of followers across her Instagram account, YouTube channel, Facebook page, and TikTok presence. She has interviewed the likes of Ariana Grande, Selena Gomez, and Kris Jenner. Taylen (or Biggs as she goes by) has appeared on red carpets and at fashion events around the world.

Similarly, Luke Meagher, known as @hautelemode on social media, has built a whole career for himself dissecting and discussing celebrity fashion. As a profile on Meagher in *Vogue* points out, "At 25 years old, with no previous ties to a company or publication, Meagher has fashioned himself as a must-watch and authoritative fashion critic online."[53] As journalist Nathalie Atkinson outlines, a new crop of fashion critics (including Avery Trufelman, Eugene Rabkin, and Mosha Lundström) is making names for themselves as informed industry outsiders who bring a unique perspective.[54]

The roles of celebrities, influencers, and creators are not mutually exclusive and can overlap. Meagher, for example, is both a critic and a content creator. Because he has built a community of loyal fashion followers, his opinion has weight, which in turn makes him an influencer. Likewise, Taylen Biggs and other content creators such as YouTuber Emma Chamberlain have become recognizable staples on red carpets, making them both content creators and celebrities of sorts.

Brands as Media Companies

Prior to the introduction of the smartphone and social media, fashion brands were mainly responsible for producing clothing and campaigns. Today, in our always on, always connected digital landscape, brands, like all companies, have shifted to become media companies, too, responsible for the production and distribution of digital content. The roles of the social media manager and director of digital strategy are fairly new inventions, born out of the need to fill e-commerce pages and the ever-hungry social feed. Instead of producing eight or ten campaign images per quarter for magazines, brands today produce hundreds of pieces of content a month and in multiple formats, from still images to videos to reels, for different platforms.

Some brands have fully embraced the opportunity, creating what's been coined "direct-to-consumer content" (that is, content aimed at the customer rather than mainstream media or fashion magazines). An example of this is GucciFest. Launched in 2020, GucciFest is a seven-day virtual film festival screening fashion films. Fans of the brand can tune in via YouTube to watch young designer films featuring cameos from the likes of Harry Styles and Billie Eilish. The festival is part of Gucci's vision to break away from the traditional fashion mold by blending rules and genres.[55]

As a result of social media, brands now have a more mature relationship with their customers and are able to sell directly to them. A Highsnobiety social report indicates that "brands that long relied on middlemen like department stores to promote their products and brand values are clearly adapting similar [direct-to-consumer] models."[56] Nike, for example, has projected that its direct-to-consumer business—bolstered through its Nike+ membership app, flagship stores, and e-commerce—will reach $16 billion in sales by the end of 2022, up from $10.4 billion just two years earlier.[57]

"The biggest shift is that fashion content was coming from the traditional titles, and now it's coming from brands themselves," Chandra Turner told *Fashionista*.[58] Turner is a longtime print magazine editor turned independent career coach. "Brands are covering the fashion industry from within, to consumers directly, because they can…. Before, we—the media—were the conduit to fashion content. That's not necessarily the case now."

One of the downsides of brands owning the tools of media production is that they can say whatever they want. For example, in 2010 when H&M launched its Conscious Collection, the brand used social media to promote the line as sustainable, highlighting eco-friendly materials such as organic cotton and recycled polyester. However, many of the claims made by H&M for its Conscious Collection were found to be deeply misleading.

The practice of overemphasizing sustainability practices is known as greenwashing. A class-action lawsuit was filed against H&M in 2022 for the misleading claims. It was eventually dismissed, resulting in essentially a slap on the wrist for the company. In light of the case, the Federal Trade Commission announced that it is revisiting its rules surrounding the use of making environmental marketing claims.[59] Greenwashing highlights the power of the smartphone and social media in shaping narratives.

Online Activism and Industry Watchdogs

Just as quickly as social media gave everyone a voice, individuals and organizations have used it to speak out against wrongdoing in the fashion industry. Organizations such as Fashion Revolution leverage their social media following to spread information about fashion's contributions to modern slavery. Their "Who Made Your Clothes?" movement was successful partially because it featured images of real garment workers from around the world holding

signs that read, "I Made Your Clothes," drawing attention to the often hidden figures involved in fashion production. By highlighting these women, Fashion Revolution calls for greater transparency in the fashion industry.

Online activism can also look like calling out bad behavior within an industry. The Instagram account @DietPrada started out as a lighthearted way of naming and shaming copycat fashion designers but has evolved into an industry watchdog exposing wrongdoings, including model abuse, racism, and misogyny.[60]

It's not just activist organizations and watchdogs that are able to call out the bad behavior of brands. When the French luxury house Balenciaga published images of children that had sexual undertones, it ignited a firestorm of outrage. The campaign "Balenciaga Gift Shop" featured photos of children with the brand's handbags that looked like teddy bears in bondage gear.[61] The children were surrounded by wine glasses and BDSM paraphernalia. The pile-on effect of publicly shaming the brand was swift, with everyone from everyday X users to Tucker Carlson condemning Balenciaga.

Fashion's Impact on the Smartphone

Just as the smartphone impacted fashion, fashion impacted the smartphone, elevating it from a functional device to a personal accessory. I remember purchasing my first mobile phone, a Motorola V2288e. It was peanut-shaped and black, but I bought different-colored snap-on covers for it to match different outfits. Since the introduction of mobile phones, cases, charms, and straps have become a way of styling and personalizing your phone. The smartphone accessory market is valued in the billions, and fashion companies have taken note.

Brands such as Bottega Veneta, Moschino, Kate Spade, Prada, and Louis Vuitton (to name a few) all have offerings to "dress" your

phone in the latest cases. Phone cases now include slots for cards at the back, eliminating the need to carry a wallet. Or you can load your cards onto your digital wallet and do away with plastic altogether. If you prefer to keep your makeup on hand, you can try the Rhode Lip Case, a silicon puffy iPhone case that includes a slot for your favorite Rhode lip gloss. Celebrity founder Hailey Bieber teased the case in February 2024 in an Instagram post and then later at the Super Bowl, where she whipped out the phone case for a midgame touchup.[62]

Some fashion brands have even collaborated with hardware companies and telecommunications providers to release designer phones, including the Versace x Nokia flip phone (2005), Dolce & Gabbana x Motorola (2005), Armani x Samsung (2007), Prada x Samsung (2012), Alexander Wang x Vivo (2020), and Thom Browne x Samsung (2020).

Tech has also borrowed the energy and ambiance of runway shows to launch new products and devices. Apple events have turned into highly produced experiences, complete with lighting, music, and prerecorded videos. Appearances from CEOs like Tim Cook have the same aura of celebrity cameos. New products and updates are announced seasonally, mimicking the fashion calendar, with influencers and reporters in attendance. Tech items, like AirPods, have also become status symbols, signaling the wearer is both wealthy and "with it." To carry outdated tech is like wearing last season's trends.

Fashion's Impact on Social Media

Just as fashion has impacted hardware, it's an industry that has had an outsized influence on social media. The introduction of Instagram Shopping was largely driven by retailers and brands who wanted to turn their online presence into sales. For those not familiar, Instagram

Shopping is a set of features, such as product tags, product detail pages, and an in-app checkout, that lets people shop a brand's photos and videos across the app. According to a report by Capital One Shopping, clothing and apparel is the largest category of items purchased on Instagram.[63]

Similarly, TikTok Shop merges e-commerce with social media. Rolled out in the United States in September 2023, TikTok Shop "empowers brands and creators to connect with highly engaged customers based on their interests, and it combines the power of community, creativity, and commerce to deliver a seamless shopping experience."[64] TikTok especially has a strong shopping culture, with trends like #TikTokMadeMeBuyIt encouraging people to share products they love. According to data from the New Consumer, US shoppers spent $363 million in gross merchandise volume in 2023 on TikTok Shop.[65]

Shoppable content—videos and multimedia where people can directly purchase products—is already a booming business in Asia. In regions like China, live video shopping accounted for $150 billion in 2022, ushering in a new era of commerce.[66] Livestream shopping is expected to make up 20% of e-commerce sales in the coming years[67] and already makes up $223 billion on the Chinese version of TikTok (Douyin).

Mobile connectivity and the ubiquity of the smartphone provide the infrastructure for many other technological developments, including the Internet of Things (which we'll delve into in the next chapter) and augmented reality (which we'll discuss in Chapter 4). The camera has opened up the fashion industry from a once-insular space to a globally interconnected ecosystem.

The smartphone's killer app, social media, has democratized fashion, empowering consumers, influencers, and brands alike to engage in unprecedented ways. Trends now emerge and fade at breakneck

speeds, fueled by platforms that blur the lines between creation, consumption, and commerce. Meanwhile, ultra-fast fashion and digital thrifting reflect both the benefits and challenges of this new era of connectivity. As the smartphone evolves, it remains a cornerstone of innovation, bridging consumers, creators, and the culture of style itself, and ushering in a new era of digital and social connectivity.