

## **The institutionalization of imitation fashion consumption: a practice driven by consumers on TikTok**

### **A institucionalização do consumo de moda de imitação: prática impulsionada por consumidores no TikTok**

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**Resumo:** *O artigo analisa as práticas que institucionalizam o consumo de moda de imitação potencializadas pela produção de conteúdo dos consumidores presentes no TikTok. Partimos do pressuposto que o consumo de réplicas de marcas consolidadas é impulsionado não só pela atividade digital de quem consome, mas também pelas lógicas algorítmicas dos aplicativos de moda, como a Shein, que se apropriam dessa dinâmica em suas estratégias comerciais. Nosso objetivo é compreender as transformações no consumo desse tipo de mercadoria evidenciando o sentido de pertencimento numa lógica que institucionaliza a moda de imitação. O estudo sustenta-se na análise de conteúdos de consumidores no TikTok que adotam tais práticas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Consumo; Moda de imitação; Institucionalização; TikTok.*

**Abstract:** *The article analyses the practices that institutionalize the consumption of imitation fashion, which are enhanced by the content produced by consumers on TikTok. We start from the assumption that the consumption of replicas of established brands is driven not only by the digital activity of those who consume, but also by the algorithmic logics of fashion apps, such as Shein, which appropriate this dynamic in their commercial strategies. Our aim is to understand the transformations in the consumption of this type of merchandise, highlighting the sense of belonging in a logic that institutionalizes imitation*

*fashion. The study is based on an analysis of content from consumers on TikTok who adopt these practices.*

**Keywords:** *Consumption. Imitation Fashion. Institutionalization. TikTok.*

## Introduction

The relationship between data, consumer behavior, and the commercial interests of companies gets stronger when we observe that these aspects are the basis for the operation and expansion of companies – mainly e-commerce companies – that make their strategic decisions based on the result of constant monitoring of the digital interactivity of their consumers. This logic differs from what happened in the 1960s, a milestone in the consumer society (HOFF, 2008) when the rural exodus and industrialization occurred, and companies began facing the challenge of “discovering what their consumers think” to create strategies that lead to consumption.

The interweaving of technology in everyday life consolidates the idea that interactions on social media and shopping apps generate new consumption practices, especially among young people. The uses and responses offered through content indicate what will become a trend. An example is the emergence of brand stores on Instagram, which have begun to appear on a large scale, whether official or owned by individuals who sell various products. Content production by influencers and consumers has boosted fashion consumption in the digital environment by interweaving algorithms in everyday life, which continuously monitor people’s desires through each activity recorded by algorithmic logic, especially in apps.

This triangulation between consumption, content production, and mediatization are elements that enhance the institutionalization of imitation fashion, making it a practice valued by young people who, in turn, are looking for new things and trends and do not want to pay the high prices adopted by established brands, such as Zara, Adidas, H&M, among others.

Based on this scenario, this article investigates consumption practices among young consumers of the Chinese store Shein, who produce and enhance content for goods similar to these brands, stimulating the consumption of imitation fashion supported by the discourse of “being fashionable while paying less.” The study seeks to understand how the

interactions and actions of consumers of imitation fashion are decisive in the institutionalization of the consumption of replica goods and the process of circulation and mediatization of products in this segment, drawing from the understanding of mediatization as a structural process of influence of the media (mass culture and control of communication). In this way, we resort to the most recent perspective of mediatization as the actions that occur in digital media, identified as deep mediatization (COULDRY; HEPP, 2020).

Brazilian consumer participation in the process of mediatization and consumption of the brand in a chain of interactions that runs through brand-consumption-mediatization-brand is the “fuel” for Shein’s visibility. This action is discussed by Trindade and Perez (2019) when they state:

If we think about matters of participation, engagement, and modes of circulation beyond structures, we can evaluate the issues of gradients of participation and collaboration types with brand actions through mediatization, observing and analyzing strategies and tactics but returning, through cultural mediation, to a process in which the media/brand logic constitutes or participates in modeling realities and their subjects (TRINDADE, PEREZ, 2019).

The processes of the mediatization of consumption, encouraged by consumer subjects in their interactions, production, participation, and engagements, feed the datafication of the brand’s digital platform that collects data from the digital traces recorded by users of the application and social media that Shein monitors as a source of information for its strategies.

We dare say that wearing similar merchandise from established brands is no longer seen as derogatory but rather something that allows you to be part of a society that values appearance, aesthetics, and keeping up with trends.

## **Fashion consumption and imitation fashion**

Fashion consumption is a factor that allows for the interpretation of the world (SANT'ANNA, 2007), where the subject appropriates signs that make them capable of acting in modern society. In this sense, this subject-consumer of fashion can make decisions that offer paths for social interaction based on the way in which they present themselves aesthetically.

Fashion consumption flows occur from the launch of products through their promotion, use, and dissemination (in smaller groups), leading to mass production and then death, characterized by disuse. Then, a new cycle begins to generate new items, establishing a process of mass production and widespread advertising to increase consumption to higher levels.

Fashion production and consumption in the 19th century occurred at a slower pace than what we know today as fast fashion. Before, the presence of a stylist or fashion designer was decisive in classifying the item as an item of value. With the advancement of technology, this process of reproducibility (BENJAMIN, 1975) displaces the ritual function of the work of art, in which reproduction implies a change in value as a high-level object. Thus, the reproducibility of fashion goods fosters a mass culture in which discourses configure a collective formation of meanings.

Mara Rúbia Sant'Anna (2007), in her argument about the relationship between fashion and modernity, states that fashion is a system that constitutes society itself, going far beyond the fact of mobilizing ephemeral tastes that change at every moment.

Our interest here is not to revisit the history of fashion. However, we believe it is relevant to understand that fashion has been an indicator for differentiating social classes at various times. The status of the designer who signs the collection, the quality of the fabrics, the aesthetic and technological innovation of the pieces, and who wears them determines the fashion consumption of the wealthiest classes. For the classes with lower purchasing power, despite the desire to be “trendy” always, the

economic factor still determines the purchasing decision process, which leads them to seek alternative options, but with lower prices, that is, items that, due to this characteristic, are more accessible in fast fashion stores.

For Enrico Cietta (2019), the concept of fast fashion is very similar to the mechanism of fast food, in which there is an acceleration of consumption through the standardization of supply, focusing on an increasingly quicker turnover of products at the point of sale, eliminating stock, that is, what is available is everything that is in the store. When one item runs out, it makes room for another instantly. This speed establishes itself in the mind of the consumer, who, upon seeing a piece, knows that if they do not buy it at that moment, there is a significant chance that they will not find it again. This business model responds very well to the constant changes in the market (CIETTA, 2019), as it combines different consumer experiences, that is, the fashion content of luxury products with the affordable prices of basic products, knowing how to incorporate consumers' choice in the process of creating new products (CIETTA, 2019).

Imitation fashion refers to the practice of replicating designs, styles, and fashion trends established by renowned designers and luxury brands. This practice often involves the mass production of clothing items, accessories, and related products that resemble the original pieces but sell at more affordable prices. Imitation fashion can range from direct replicas to creative interpretations and adaptations of existing fashion concepts.

The purchase, dissemination, and use of goods like those produced by well-known and established brands in the market characterize the consumption of imitation fashion. Similar items that imitate designer pieces are often made with different fabrics of inferior quality and finish and sold at much lower prices.

As a well-known brand launches a new collection, it is not long before one can find replica pieces in other stores, street vendors, and the Internet. This occurs by monitoring trends for the instant production

that fuels imitation fashion. Various factors drive the imitation fashion consumption phenomenon, including the pursuit of social status, pressure to conform to prevailing aesthetic norms, and the search for affordable trends. Consumers are attracted to the idea of wearing items that resemble luxury products without paying the associated high cost. Moreover, the rapid dissemination of information and images through digital social media contributes to the rapid popularization of certain styles and designs, increasing the demand for more affordable versions.

This agile, low-cost, low-quality process, which enchants young people, erodes established brands (SHI; LIU; LEE; SRINIVASAN, 2021). There are other implications in the production of fashion and the generation of trends, such as the absence of a designer or stylist in imitation fashion. Consumers of imitation fashion disregard the low quality and short lifespan of products. For them, it does not matter if the piece will not last long since they paid a low price.

In this sense, Perez, Trindade, Fogaça, and Batista (2013) argue that pirated (imitation) products take on a distinct symbolic charge, offering alternative meanings and challenging the dominant narratives of consumption and identity. For the authors, piracy is a form of cultural resistance and a means of accessing culture and consumer goods for economically marginalized groups.

### **Platformization of fashion, algorithms and the modulation of consumer behavior**

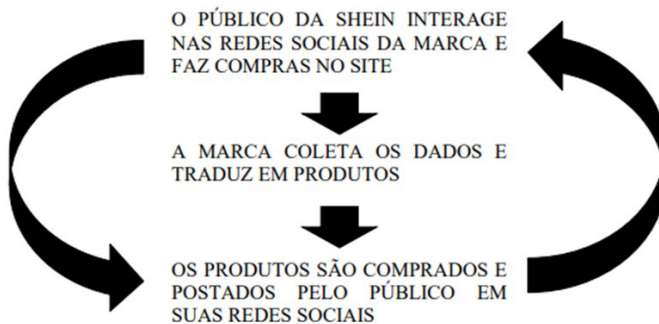
Digital social media and apps play a fundamental role in the consumption of imitation fashion. For the analysis of this article, we used both the Shein store app and the social media TikTok due to their interrelation in promoting consumption practices, advertising, and dissemination of imitation fashion on the internet.

Shein is an e-commerce company based in China known for offering a variety of clothing and fashion accessories at affordable prices. In Brazil, Shein has won over the Generation Z audience, causing a significant

transformation in fashion consumption. Regarding its method of operation, Shein uses a framework of algorithms to analyze users' browsing and purchasing behavior to understand people's desires in each of the countries in which it operates. Based on this information, it is possible to personalize users' experiences, suggesting products likely to interest each customer. The app does this through personalized recommendations on its home page, promotional emails, targeted ads, and discount coupon offers.

Tremarim (2022), in his master's dissertation, defended at the post-graduate program in communication at Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, presents the consumption and circulation scheme in the Shein process, as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1 - Consumption and circulation scheme in the Shein process



Source: TREMARIN (2022)

This strategic consumption mechanism supports the company's power to manipulate the interests of its audiences in each of the countries in which it operates, as Landoswki points out:

[...] if strategist-manipulators recognize what the other wants and, better yet, dedicate themselves to knowing it in depth, making it as transparent as possible, detecting its determinations, it is only to manipulate it with greater assurance, to gain more power over it, acting on its motivations and reasons, possibly the most secret ones (LANDOWSKI, 2014 p. 33).



The central phase of the scheme, when the brand collects data and translates it into products, materializes in how consumers find similar products on its app.

The idea of fashion platformization is constituted not only by the support of apps but also by constant monitoring (VAN DIJCK, 2017), which functions as informational fuel for tactics to modulate purchasing behavior (COUTINHO, 2021) and decisions about what will or will go into production, always focusing on the fleeting consumption of imitation fashion.

That strategy emerges in the practices adopted by Shein when we observe that Shein closely monitors fashion trends and uses algorithms to identify the latest tendencies and purchasing patterns quickly. This monitoring allows it to adjust its inventory and highlight the most popular products, ensuring its offers align with consumer preferences. Part of the information concerns which products consumers view, items they add to the cart, and which products reach the final purchase stage. These algorithms help identify customer behavior patterns and preferences. Another automated feature on the platform is the pricing of items available on the app. The algorithm can automatically adjust prices based on several factors, such as demand, available stock, and seasonality, including temporary discounts, personalized coupons, or special promotions to encourage consumption.

Based on the collection of various data sources, Shein employs recommendation algorithms to suggest products to customers, using collaborative filtering techniques, content analysis, and machine learning to identify products that are most likely to interest each customer in different countries, taking into account their purchase history, previously viewed products and current fashion trends. Thus, we understand that Shein's algorithmic process continuously promotes fashion consumption supported by personalization, dynamic pricing, trend tracking, influencer marketing, and customer feedback analysis.

But how does this operation work so effectively? In this analysis, we identified that Shein seeks information on the consumption behavior of

young people on the platform with the highest concentration of influencers, TikTok. Shein's great idea was to partner with influencers on the platform to understand consumption interests.

### **TikTok: consumers and the promotion of consumption by imitation fashion**

The delimitation of this study involved a methodological organization divided into three stages. The first stage focused on a bibliographic review on the subject of fashion; the second focused on gathering information about the functionalities of the Shein app; the third researched consumer publications, especially on TikTok, based on hashtag searches, to gather content that promotes and institutionalizes the consumption of imitation fashion as a socially validated practice.

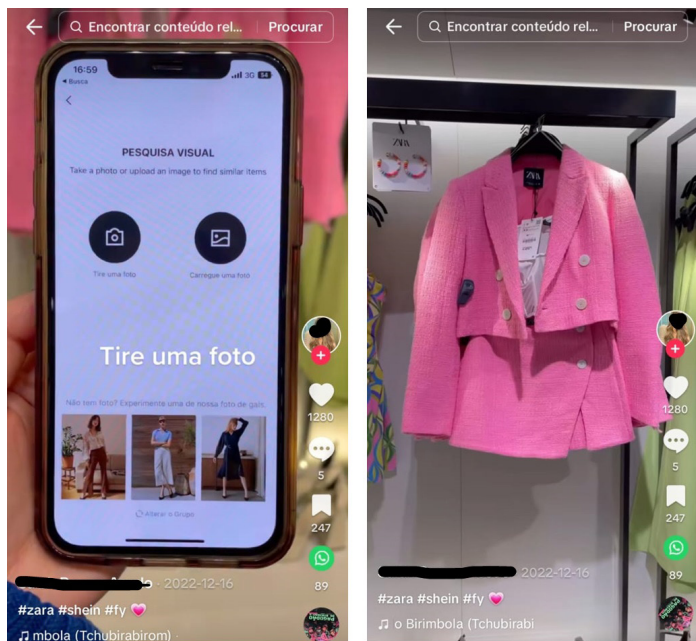
To collect research data, we established the following terms for the TikTok search: "zaraxshein", "diorxshein", adidasxshein, and #vansxshein.

Since the search system does not recognize more than one word at a time, the procedure was done by individually searching for each hashtag and selecting one or more publications that spotlight the discussion.

Thus, among the various profiles that appear as results, several present similar products and are available on Shein. We selected some publications to illustrate how this process has a high potential for publicity and engagement around imitation fashion.

As a result of the searches, we separated the publications into six figures. The first figure is a video in which the publication serves as a tutorial on how to find pieces similar to those from Zara in the Shein app. We sorted the other figures by brand - Zara, Dior, Adidas, and Vans.

Figure 2 - How to find (?)



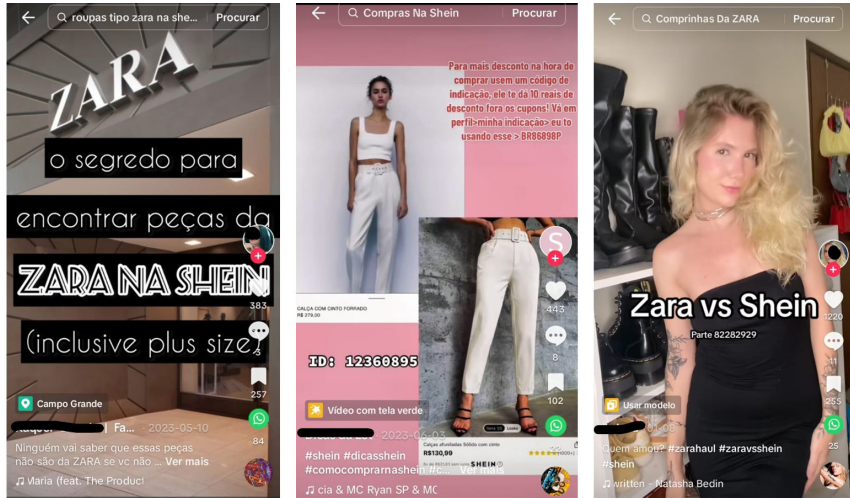
Source: TikTok: #zaraxshein.

The Shein app is full of merchandise, which makes it hard to find a specific item. You must spend a lot of time searching, which makes the process long and exhausting. For this reason, several consumer profiles on TikTok (we also identified this practice on Instagram) search for items and post them, providing their ID. In the case of Figure 1, the consumer shows how people can do this process themselves. All they need to do is go to a Zara store, open the Shein app, and take a photo of an item similar to the one they want to find.

Based on the image, the store's algorithm finds and presents an equivalent item at a much lower price. That shows that Shein has added a feature to its app to promote imitation fashion and collect information on the desire for items originating from luxury brands.

In the search for #zaraxshein, we selected the posts shown in Figures 3 and 4:

Figure 3 - Zara x Shein (a)



Source: TikTok: #zaraxshein.

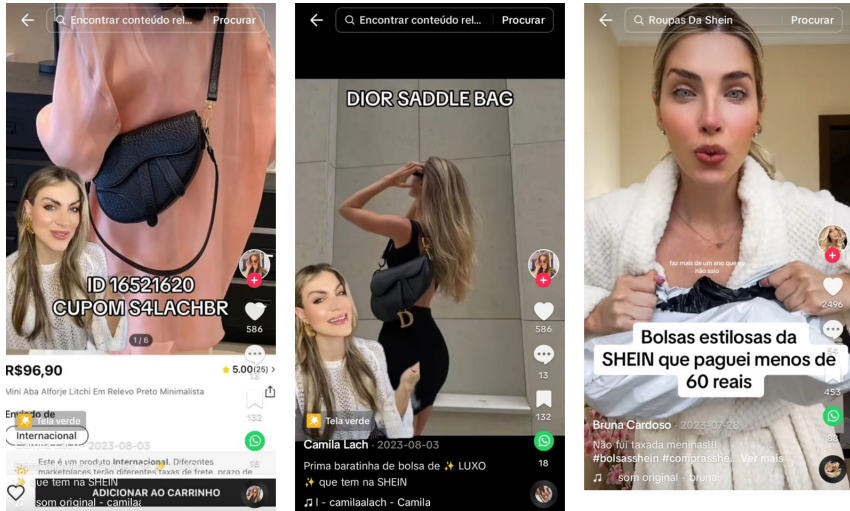
Figure 4 - Zara x Shein (b)



Source: TikTok: #zaraxshein.

As Figure 4 shows, consumers act as disseminating agents of imitation fashion. The content produced has a “service provision” characteristic, helping others to find Zara-like items within the Shein app by always presenting its ID, as already mentioned. In some cases, there is also an exclusive discount coupon for the consumer who published the content.

Figure 5 - Dior x Shein



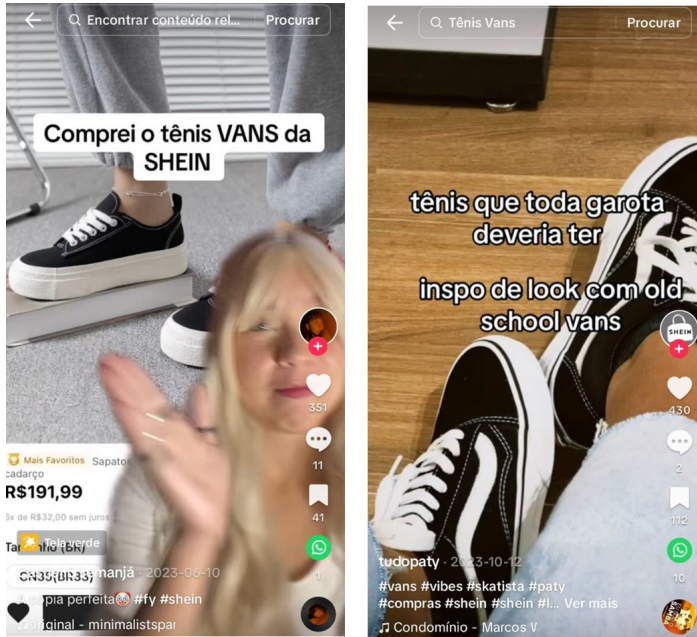
Source: TikTok: #diorxshein.

In the case of Dior, the consumer in Figure 4 presents, at the beginning of the post, the brand's Daddle Bag, which was wildly successful when it was launched, despite its price of R\$6,000.00, becoming an object of desire. She then shows a similar piece on the Shein app for R\$96.60. The speech uses language such as: “Look, if you love Dior and cannot afford a high investment like this, this bag is beautiful and could be a great option for you to rock.”

Among other Dior replica products, one can find items such as lip gloss with metallic packaging almost identical to the original.

Finally, we present in Figure 5 an example of the Vans brand, which is a success among a younger public but whose prices are considered high.

Figure 6 - Vans x Shein



Source: TikTok: #vansxshein.

In this case, the consumer introduces her content with the phrase: “I bought Vans sneakers from Shein.” In another publication, the call to action encourages other consumers, saying, “sneakers that every girl should have.” Even though “Vans sneakers from Shein” are not so similar, given the brand is highly sought after and has launched a model with a higher sole, it becomes an alternative for temporary use.

From the examples presented, it is clear that Shein consumers produce and publish a large volume of content on the TikTok app to disseminate imitation products of desired original brands. This content production reinforces how consumers publicize imitation fashion themselves in an attempt not only to consume but also to obtain benefits such as progressive discounts on future purchases, visibility, and a false sense of “service provision” in the sense of showing that it is possible to consume fashion and trends from replica pieces at a lower cost. Here,

we adopt an interpretive stance on the statements in the publications, taking the author's subjectivity.

Therefore, TikTok has become a place for promoting replica products, mainly published by individuals with a high follower count. That said, we understand the data collected represents a small portion of the practice but can show how this phenomenon has been gaining ground in these environments.

### **The institutionalization of imitation fashion**

Based on the results found in searches using the hashtags provided, we understand that the institutionalization of imitation fashion consumption occurs not only through the construction of meanings, especially that of belonging in the symbolic universe of piracy (PEREZ; TRINDADE, 2013), but also through interactions between users who act as true prospectors – first on the websites of established stores, such as Zara to identify trend pieces and then on the Shein app to find similar pieces as a way of “providing a service” to other consumers.

The consumption of imitation fashion reinforces new rituals and, therefore, the idea of consumption based on the production of desire (CURTIS, 2013) and places consumers in an even more complex network “that involves agents that arouse, instigate, and foster their desires,” giving way to the production of intangible goods that bring with them a sense of belonging. In the same sense, the consumption of a brand that represents significant and mediatized values related to sustainability attributes to those who consume it its values and the status associated with them (TRINDADE; ZIMMERMANN; MEIRA, 2019).

In October 2023, an article published in *Estadão* reported a little about the behavior of some Shein and Shopee (a similar store) consumers. Through these people's reports, it is possible to identify the power of influence these stores have over their customers. For example, we present some phrases from people who say they are “addicted” to buying from these stores: “I couldn't sleep anymore.” “When it arrived, I didn't even remember I had bought it.” “I bought more when I was depressed.”

“You start to see what it’s like. You buy a cheap thing just to test it out, and it starts contaminating you.” “There are special offers in the early morning hours. I’ve gone three days without sleeping” (CUNHA, 2023).

The practices of these stores, especially Shein, have reached the potential for recurring purchases. Adding new products to the app every week creates a feeling of novelty that people interpret as a must have. From this behavior, we resort to the question that Clotilde Perez (2020) asks in her work *Há limites para o consumo?* According to Perez (2020 p. 62):

Contemporary brands have learned ways of seduction to appease the hedonistic dimension that we all have with their offers, and the moment of purchase in its ritualistic form is privileged. [...] People can be manipulated by the persuasive action of advertising and brands. However, they are capable of unimaginable appropriations by engineers, designers, or advertisers. It is in everyday life that consumer relations are truly established (PEREZ, 2020).

In this sense, we understand the consumption of imitation fashion, even when involved in algorithmic logic and the practices of companies and consumers, occurs due to the desire to belong to social groups in everyday interactions.

## Considerations

Based on the analysis presented, we conclude that the institutionalization of imitation fashion, which occurs through the consumption of replicas of premium brands, is enhanced by Shein’s *modus operandi*, which in turn is supported by algorithmic processes but is also accompanied by trends and low prices, most often driven by discount practices, influencers, and novelty. Thus, imitation products from a brand translate into status the same institutional rites as legitimate products from the same brand.

Consumers understand this practice as a benefit of helping each other, allowing them to find a piece easily at the time of purchase through



published content and, when purchasing the desired product, pay a lower price (due to Shein's policy and the discounts).

This phenomenon promotes the idea of personal prominence in the social environment using goods similar to those of premium brands. This fact differs from the previous processes of fashion consumption based on the differentiation of social classes (SANTAELLA, 2023).

Due to its characteristic of being a high-end but low-cost product, imitation favors the social inclusion of individuals who seek to be fashionable and within their means. In other words, "I didn't spend a fortune to be trendy."

The article shows that consumption practices embedded in the algorithmic logic of apps and consumer interactions constitute the institutionalization of imitation fashion consumption: "Use my coupon and get a discount!"

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