

# Fashion for hire

Americans embrace clothing rental services

New York, United States

Remember when you bought an expensive evening gown for an event, only to ever wear it once or twice? Or picked up a trendy T-shirt, only to leave it gathering dust in the closet?

Those days are over for more and more American women, who are embracing clothing rental services as a way to freshen up their wardrobes -- but the growing sector could threaten the traditional fashion industry.

"Rental is the current buzzword in retail," says Kayla Marci, a market analyst at research firm Edited.

Just a decade ago, clothing rentals were for special occasions. But the business has since transformed and is raking in \$1 billion in sales worldwide, according to a study published in April by business consulting firm Grand View Research.

Cosmetics executive Jacqueline Jackson had her eureka moment when she realized that a monthly unlimited subscription for Rent The Runway, the leader in the American sector, would cost less than for her to rent one dress she wanted to wear to a wedding.

"It was just nice to have the option to have this kind of unlimited closet and be able to wear things that I wouldn't be able to own necessarily because a lot of the items are pretty expensive," said Jackson, a mother of two young children.

"I don't have any time to shop."

Like many of its competitors, Rent The Runway (RTR) -- which has more than 11,000 monthly subscribers -- offers ready-to-wear pieces from luxury labels like Victoria Beckham, Proenza Schouler and Phillip Lim. Each item would cost several

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COSMETICS EXECUTIVE JACQUELINE JACKSON

hundred dollars to buy.

For \$89 a month, a subscriber can get four pieces at a time from the company, now valued at \$1 billion. RTR also offers an unlimited subscription for \$159 a month.

Seattle-based start-up Armoire, which already has several thousand subscribers, offers a plan at \$149 a month.

Once a Rent The Runway client has worn an item and wants to swap it for something else, they can send it back via UPS or drop it off at a bricks-and-mortar store. The company handles cleaning.

Customers also have the option to buy the item at a reduced price.

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The various clothing rental platforms currently on offer, which only cater to women for the time being, process the data they receive from users about preferences and measurements.

They then use artificial intelligence to propose pieces

they believe subscribers would want to wear.

"We'll show her items that we know she'll like but we can slowly push her outside her comfort zone and introduce items that she wouldn't normally pick for herself, that she wouldn't normally wear," says Lili Morton, who is in charge of community development at Armoire.

**A move away from 'fast fashion'**

The other trump card for clothing rental services is its sustainability and rejection of excessive consumption -- themes that resonate for their clientele.

Swedish furniture giant IKEA is moving into furniture rental, a service already provided in the United States by start-up Fernish.

"I think people like the idea of buying less fast fashion, things that you buy and are good enough quality to wear for one season," says Jackson.

"It's nice to have less of that junk in your closet and spend

money to wear quality clothes."

According to several industry sources, most pieces are used about 15 times before they are taken out of rotation.

Armoire has reached a deal with non-profit organization Dress for Success, which offers free professional attire to women in need.

For some labels, rentals are providing a gateway to new customers. But more generally, it is offering competition to traditional ready-to-wear sales.

As the sector takes off, several platforms like Haverdash are launching low-cost options. Traditional brands like American Eagle, Ann Taylor and Urban Outfitters are following suit.

"These platforms are disrupting the fashion industry and changing the way we shop," says Marci.

Since she subscribed to RTR, Jackson says she has bought fewer items and more basics.

"Renting is really like sharing. You're not just buying, buying, buying," she adds.

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Rosanna Falconer wearing an Ulla Johnson dress rented from Hurr (Courtesy of Evening Standard)

## Merkel heir apparent joins cabinet in risky bid for power

Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's heir apparent joined her cabinet yesterday as defence minister, a high-profile job often called a poisoned chalice in Berlin's fraught political landscape.

The surprise appointment of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer late Tuesday came just hours after the current head of the German military, Ursula von der Leyen, was elected as the first woman to lead the European Commission.

The decision by AKK, as she is commonly known, to take charge of a sprawling administration widely seen as unwieldy and scandal-prone was described as a risky gambit to shore up political support.

At a naming ceremony at the presidential palace in Berlin in Merkel's presence, the 56-year-old formally accepted the port-

folio from von der Leyen.

"The men and women of the Bundeswehr (armed forces) deserve the highest political priority and my full commitment," she said.

"I am aware of my great responsibility and want to live up to it."

Shakuntala Banerjee of ZDF public television said AKK was "stepping up and taking over the most difficult ministry".

"The chances to win big are there -- but the risk of failure is also greater."

News weekly Der Spiegel said the defence ministry, rocked by a series of mismanagement allegations on von der Leyen's watch, could prove to be a "minefield" for AKK.

"But because that's the case, the ministry also offers a chance for her to sharpen her profile, in an area where she lacks it: in foreign and security policy -- an



Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (left) has taken over from Ursula von der Leyen at the helm of Germany's defence ministry

area where a chancellor needs some experience," said its commentator Philipp Wittrock.

"The chancellery remains the big goal and the defence ministry can serve as a stage for her to prove herself."

**'Abusing the Bundeswehr'**

However opposition politicians seized on AKK's lack of expertise in military affairs at a time when the Bundeswehr has suffered chronic equipment problems and accusations of underfunding, not least from US President Donald Trump.

"The chancellor and the CDU have shown once again that the needs of the Bundeswehr don't interest them at all," Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann of the Free Democrats told the daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

"They are abusing the stricken Bundeswehr for their little personnel games."