



How the unclasp handbag became a status symbol

JOSH GREENBLATT

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On a recent episode of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, cast member Dorit Kemsley celebrated her new book deal by treating herself to a Hermès Mini Kelly bag – “one of those stupid bags they all have that they can’t get the clasps closed,” wrote Brian Moylan in his [recap](#) for Vulture.

It’s not just reality stars. The unclasp handbag has become a conspicuously common styling cue at fashion shows and online. At Chanel, [Loewe](#) and Tory Burch, models glide down the runway with their bags undone. There are instructive Reddit threads on “how to wear luxury” where handbag etiquette is as much a matter of style as it is semiotics. One subreddit questions why American influencer Campbell Puckett’s Hermès Kelly is “[always unclasp](#)ed.”

London-based cultural analyst J’Nae Phillips has an answer. She says that structured, angular bags with identifiable turn-lock closures – such as the Kelly, which starts at around \$15,600 – “are so formal and specific. Leaving it undone is visible from across the street.”

While you may occasionally spot someone carrying an unzipped top-handle bag from Loewe or Prada, Phillips said, “the more ‘proper’ the bag, the more pointed the gesture.”

If carrying a beat-up Birkin says, “I actually use this, it’s not just for show,” then nonchalantly swanning around with a half-open, five-figure handbag gives off an inherent ease with luxury.

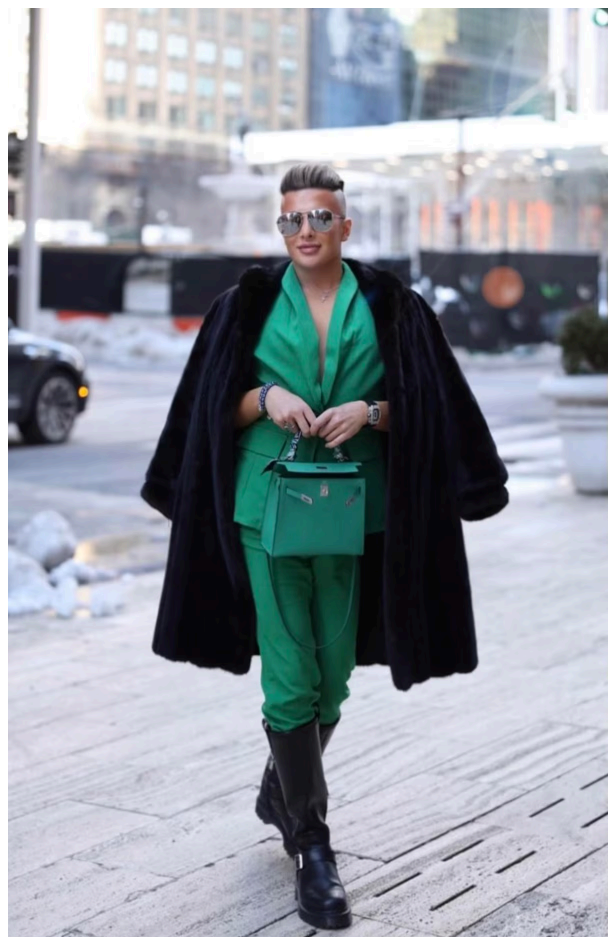
“Looking effortlessly chic is something many of us aspire to,” says Globe and Mail Style Magazine contributing fashion editor Nadia Pizzimenti. “The carelessness of leaving your \$10,000 bag open, whether it’s intentional or not, creates a bit of intrigue about the wearer. Who is she? Where is she rushing off to?”

An ad campaign, social media trend or styling trick can give a piece of clothing or accessory new context that changes its cultural meaning. Think of what Abercrombie & Fitch did for cargo pants, said Dr. Joseph Hancock, a professor at Philadelphia’s Drexel University in the online retail and merchandising program.

Bruce Weber’s iconic images of American co-eds tackling each other in the brand’s cargo pants suddenly made the sexually-neutral, granola garment a wardrobe staple for hot, rich teens. Where you could once



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smell the outdoors, you could now smell the pheromones.

Similarly, an unfastened bag lends a sense of ease to an otherwise fussy look. That's why Sergio El-Azzi, a luxury real estate agent in Toronto known for his glitzy style, lets the clasps hang loose on his green Kelly bag.

"It's about making luxury feel personal," he says. "When it's fully clasped and perfectly structured, it feels formal and serious. Leaving it unclasped and open takes the edge off." The bag is still a symbol of imperious elegance, but letting it hang loose makes it – and the wearer – feel a little less so.

So, is this simple styling gesture a more relaxed mode of living with luxury, or just status-signalling as usual? Probably a bit of both: a considered effort to look effortless. If you have a closet full of Kellys, you can afford to be a little less precious with them. Only the masses would treat a bag like a museum piece.

Toronto real estate agent Sergio El-Azzi carrying his unclasped Hermes Kelly bag.

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