

# My eBay addiction cost me everything

What started as an online shopping hobby for 26-year-old Francesca Grillo, an events manager from London, ended in a £30,000 obsession that destroyed her relationship

As told to Amanda Revell Walton Photos by Ophelia Wynne

'The day my boyfriend found dozens of bags of clothes from eBay hidden at the back of my wardrobe, I knew it meant the end for our relationship.

'For months I'd denied that my spending was out of control, but when Marcus found bags stuffed full of designer outfits, we had a huge row. "If you're hiding all this stuff from me, what else are you hiding?" he shouted.

'Until that moment, I couldn't admit that he, my family, and my friends were right. But the day he left, I had to face the fact I was addicted to eBay. I sat there, stunned, surrounded by my prized collection – 15 pairs of designer shoes and boots (Fendi and Gucci), five coats (Armani, Prada), dozens of dresses (Moschino, Donna Karen, Marc Jacobs), 10 vintage bags (Gucci, Chanel) and endless accessories. 'Ironically, it was Marcus, 25, who first introduced me to online bidding. Two years ago, he gave me a beautiful vintage typewriter he'd bought on eBay and I asked him to show me how to use the site. I was blown away: you could buy anything from Fendi bags to fridges to whole flats.

'I made my first eBay purchase when I was looking for something for Marcus's birthday, and got distracted by the designer clothes section. A gorgeous blue Marc Jacobs jumper was on sale for a starting price of £15. Being label-savvy, I couldn't believe my eyes and immediately put in a bid. Over the next three days,

I kept logging on to check I wasn't being out-bid. Seeing that someone had logged a rival bid made me furious, and I kept making higher and higher offers. It was such a buzz – like driving too fast in a sports car but managing not to crash. 'GETTING THAT JUMPER FOR £79 WHEN I KNEW IT WAS WORTH £200 FELT GREAT, and I couldn't wait for it to arrive. I remember the feeling of pure joy when it fitted perfectly. It was a beautiful piece of clothing but, if I'm honest, it wasn't the jumper that gave me the thrill. It was beating everyone else to it.

'At first, I was only spending the same as I had in the shops – about £150 a month – and I loved bagging a bargain. But soon the temptation to blow my budget became overwhelming and I started buying really expensive things. 'Before long, I was completely out of control and stopped thinking about what I was spending. My biggest splurge was £700 on some Gucci glasses, Fendi boots and a Marc Jacobs scarf – all in one day. 'I SOON FOUND I HAD TO CUT BACK ON OTHER EXPENSES TO MAKE ENDS MEET – despite earning £30,000 a year and only paying £600 rent a month. But even then I never sat down to look at the numbers – I didn't want to admit the truth. Instead, I started sacrificing the cinema and theatre trips I used to enjoy. I also cut down on socialising and eating out – from twice a week to once a month. I didn't mind. The less money

I spent on going out, the more I had to spend on eBay.

**'BUT STAYING IN ALL THE TIME SOON STARTED TO AFFECT MY FRIENDSHIPS.**

I really regret missing out on a trip to Scotland with my girlfriends. I felt left out but the designer handbag I bought online that weekend eased the pain. 'Another good friend has also fallen out with me since I missed her 30th birthday. I knew that with dinner and clubbing planned, I'd end up spending a lot of money that I preferred to use on eBay. She said I was never around any more and accused me of putting eBay before my friends.

**'MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MARCUS WAS SOON UNDER STRAIN, TOO.** I was so obsessed that I barely saw him at all. I'd spend six hours a day on eBay, logging on before work and checking the auctions during my breaks. Working at events in the evenings, I'd go to the toilet to check bids on my mobile. Then, when I got home – even if it was 4am – I'd spend another two hours online to make sure I didn't miss out.

'After months of splurging, I came down to earth with a bump when my credit card was refused in a shop. I'll never forget the shame – everyone behind me in the queue was staring and I couldn't pay for the few books and magazines I wanted. On my way home, I prayed it was a mistake, but knew deep down that my spending was at crisis point. ▶



Marc Jacobs dress

£250

Marc Jacobs jacket

£95

C by Chloé dress

£250

Chloé top

£95

Ferretti dress

£750

Prada handbag

£350

Prada heels

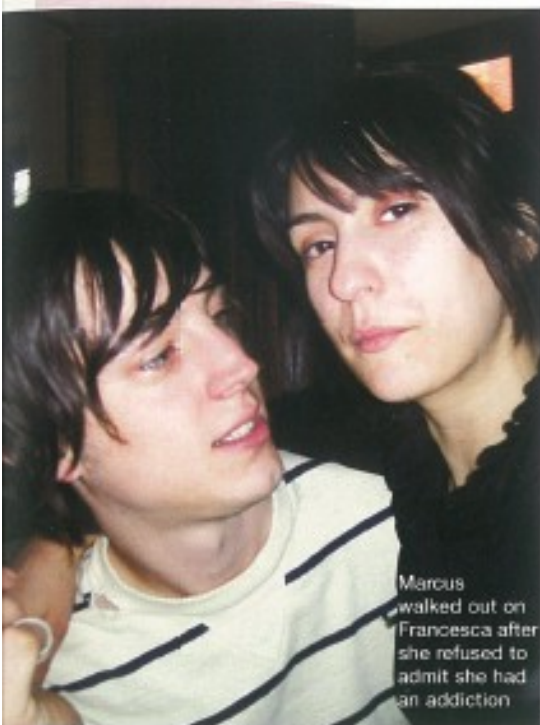
£200

Missoni skirt

£200

Vintage Gucci bag

£95



Marcus walked out on Francesca after she refused to admit she had an addiction

Checking the figures, I was horrified to discover what I'd spent – £1,500 on eBay in just one month.

I started dog- and baby-sitting locally, but my low point was definitely handing out flyers in the street. Even then, though, my motivation was to get back on my feet financially so I could return to feeding my eBay habit.

**'ALL THIS TIME, I NEVER TOLD MARCUS WHAT DEEP TROUBLE I WAS IN.** I think he suspected, but I hid it because I knew he'd make me feel ashamed and, hey, it's my money – I should be able to do what I like with it. He warned me that soon I wouldn't have a life, which really hurt. Perhaps because I knew he was right. 'He first began to suspect something was very wrong when we went on holiday to New York and I hardly bought a thing because I was so strapped for cash. Our dream trip we'd saved up for was torture because I was in so much debt. Marcus was furious that my moods ruined the holiday he'd been looking forward to. I'm really ashamed of all the lies I've told. I once asked Marcus for money, telling him there was a mix-up at the bank, but really I needed the cash because I'd just over-spent on a designer shirt. **'I HID MY BAGS OF EBAY GOODIES ALL OVER THE HOUSE. I'VE BOUGHT LOTS OF CLOTHES I'VE NEVER EVEN WORN,** because I know people will be shocked by how expensive they are. I used to love shopping at Topshop, H&M and Miss Selfridge, but now my tastes are way more sophisticated. There's a gorgeous C by Chloé top sitting in the back of my

'Because I was never around, Marcus thought I was having an affair. I was so desperate to hide my problem, I didn't do anything to make him think otherwise'

wardrobe right now that I've never tried on – it's still in the bag. I also spent £800 on a beautiful black Alberta Ferretti dress that I've never worn because it's a bit too long. I just like looking at it.

'My biggest row with Marcus was over a white, '80s Gucci shoulder bag with a little gold lock. I just had to have it. Before I knew it, the bag had zoomed up to £1,000 – and I just kept bidding. Marcus saw what I was doing and went mad. He grabbed the laptop off me, and yelled, 'You're insane! You can't spend £1,000 – it's just a bag!' I tried to explain that it was vintage, but he wouldn't listen. I couldn't miss out on the bag, so I left the flat to go and use my sister's computer, but Marcus ran after me and blocked my way.

'With only seven minutes of bidding left, I begged him to let me pass or I would lose the bag. I could tell he was shocked by how desperate I was.

I remember him yelling, 'You're addicted to this, Francesca!' But I pushed past him and got to my sister's just in time. I remember logging on and shouting, 'I got it!' at the top of my voice.

**'IN THE END, IT WASN'T THE ROWS THAT DESTROYED OUR RELATIONSHIP, BUT THE LIES AND SUSPICION.** Because I was never around, Marcus thought I was having an affair. I was so desperate to hide my problem, I didn't do anything to make him think otherwise. Often, I'd disappear into the bedroom with my mobile and I knew he thought I was texting another man, but really I was only checking the auctions. I never thought he'd make me choose between him and eBay, but in the end I suppose he couldn't take any more.

**'I'VE THOUGHT ABOUT STOPPING, BUT I CAN'T. THE IDEA OF A DAY WITHOUT EBAY MAKES MY STOMACH SINK.** My world revolves around online bidding. I've spent around £30,000 on eBay over the past two years. The most expensive thing I've bought recently was a vintage

Chanel bag, for £1,000. And I'm in denial – after £1,000, I block it out. It's possible that I've spent a lot more than that on one item but I refuse to let myself think about it.

'Sometimes, my financial situation gets really bad. There have been plenty of times I've fallen behind with my household bills so I could pay for some clothes. I know I should be thinking about saving to buy a house, but I just can't stay away from eBay.

**'I'VE HEARD THAT ADDICTIONS COME FROM A NEED TO ESCAPE OTHER, DEEPER PROBLEMS, BUT I REALLY DON'T HAVE ANY.**

I have a great life – I'm purely addicted to the thrill of bidding and winning. Until Marcus left, I genuinely didn't think I had a problem. I reasoned that because I don't drink, smoke or do drugs, eBay is my vice. But now I know that he was right all along – I do need help.' ■

*If you need help with an online shopping addiction, call:*

*National Debtline: 0808 808400*

*Samaritans: 08457 909090*

*Or visit [www.netaddiction.com](http://www.netaddiction.com).*

## Online addiction

● We now spend more online than we do via mail order. As a result, a growing number of people are addicted to internet auction sites, amassing huge debts they have no hope of paying off.

● Lethally, these sites combine gambling, shopping, immediate gratification – and the chance to get into enormous debt.

● Dr Maressa Hecht Orzack, a psychologist who founded the Computer Addictive Studies Center at the McLean Hospital, Massachusetts, says: 'I hear about women like Francesca all the time – it seems to be the latest form of thrill-seeking. I met a woman recently who had bought two cars on eBay and had got herself into massive debt. She completely lost her sense of boundaries. Few addicts would dream of spending these sums of money in real stores – but because online buying isn't face to face, the spending doesn't feel real.'