



Power And Control Through Communication in *The Devil Wears Prada*

Ms. Romali Patel

Research Scholar

Sarvajanik University, Surat, Gujarat

Abstract

*This paper examines the mechanisms of power and control in *The Devil Wears Prada* through the lens of communication, focusing on the dynamics between Miranda Priestly and her assistant, Andrea Sachs. Using Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory, the study explores how communication is used not just to manage tasks but to enforce hierarchical dominance, emotional suppression, and competitive tension within the workplace. The analysis reveals how lean communication modes, ambiguous messaging, and emotional detachment create a culture of compliance and fear. Through detailed textual analysis and theoretical framing, the research highlights the emotional cost of authoritarian leadership and argues for more human-centred communication strategies in organizational structures.*

Keywords: Workplace Hierarchy, Authoritarian Leadership, Toxic Work Culture, Human Relations Theory, Media Richness Theory, Organizational Communication

Introduction

In high-pressure corporate environments, communication is not merely transactional—it is a central mechanism for maintaining authority and reinforcing hierarchy. *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger offers a compelling narrative of a rigid organizational structure where communication becomes an instrument of psychological control. The character of Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of *Runway* magazine, represents a leadership style rooted in emotional detachment and command-driven interaction. Her assistant, Andrea Sachs, is caught in a web of escalating demands, isolation, and diminishing self-worth—outcomes that stem from Miranda's reliance on controlling and opaque communication.

This paper situates its analysis within the frameworks of Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory to better understand the structure of power at *Runway*. The former critiques leadership that neglects employee well-being, while the latter shows how mismatched communication mediums exacerbate confusion and emotional stress. Together, they offer insight into how a toxic culture emerges not just from the demands of leadership, but from the very language and style of interaction employed.

Literature Review

Human Relations Theory, first developed by Elton Mayo (1933), asserts that social relationships, emotional support, and employee recognition are key to organizational success. Mayo and his contemporaries, such as Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), argued that ignoring the human aspect of labour leads to dissatisfaction and psychological distress. In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda's disregard for these principles is evident. Her interactions with Andrea are transactional and devoid of empathy, turning a mentorship opportunity into an emotionally exhausting experience.

Media Richness Theory, formulated by Daft and Lengel (1986), proposes that the appropriateness of a communication medium depends on the complexity of the message. Rich media—like face-to-face dialogue—are best suited for ambiguous or emotionally nuanced interactions. However, Miranda frequently uses lean media, such as abrupt phone calls and terse directives, to deliver complex or urgent messages. This method,

while efficient in conveying orders, deprives Andrea of the clarity and context needed to perform effectively, amplifying her anxiety.

Additionally, Jean Lipman-Blumen's (2005) work on toxic leadership explores how some leaders maintain control through manipulation, humiliation, and emotional neglect. Miranda's consistent emotional detachment and demand for perfection, combined with her creation of a hostile work environment, reflect these toxic traits. Pelletier (2010) supports this view by highlighting how toxic leaders breed organizational cultures that normalize fear and inhibit team cohesion.

Gideon Kunda (1992), in his ethnographic study of corporate rituals, shows how image and symbolic compliance often override authentic interaction in modern companies. At *Runway*, image is everything—employees are judged by their ability to reflect the brand rather than their actual performance. Material symbols, such as luxury shoes or flawless presentation, serve as silent codes of belonging and competence. Andrea's gradual internal conflict between personal identity and imposed organizational values demonstrates this cultural assimilation process.

Feminist scholars such as Susan Faludi (1991) and Sheryl Sandberg (2013) also offer context. They explore how women in leadership are often trapped between expectations of emotional warmth and institutionalized demands for assertiveness. Miranda's character is complex—her ruthlessness may also reflect the gendered double standards within corporate leadership.

Analysis

Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* offers a vivid portrayal of a high-pressure, hierarchical environment, where communication is wielded as a tool of control between superiors and subordinates. Themes of control, competition and the wrench of ambition are explored through the journey of Paula Priestley's junior assistant, Andrea Sachs, in a novel. A key part of the analysis involves applying Human Relations Theory and Media Richness Theory to understand the toxic atmosphere at Runway. Communication is shown as a crucial determinant of workplace dynamics, particularly in hierarchical settings where interpersonal control is exercised through communicative practices. *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger. It presents a good narrative that shows how communication is an instrument of control as well as a tool for organizational efficiency. In this section, we consider the communication in the novel from the points of Human Relations Theory and Media Richness theory by concentrating on the ways in which Miranda Priestly, editor in chief of Runway magazine, manages her subordinates: Andrea Sachs in particular.

The opening scene serves as a powerful microcosm of life at Runway, encapsulating the intense pressures and communicative practices that underpin its toxic hierarchy. For that, though it can be said that it was quite insane thing to come through here, this also gives us a true notion of the insane amount of pressure they have here, and not just under the immense pressure they carry as we know them, and by the incredibly toxic leadership style of Miranda Priestly, a leader who wants so much and demands so much – and yet there is absolutely no empathy.

A simile is used to depict Andrea's struggle—comparable to attempting to transform chaotic Manhattan traffic into a controlled yellow line on the road—symbolizing her futile attempts at self-care amid Miranda's overpowering control. Without preparation, without preparatory guidance, she is pushed into an impossible task. Following it is their version of Andrea's frantic desire to stay in control:

“Clutch, gas, shift (neutral to first? Or first to second?), release clutch,” I repeated over and over in my head... Sweat trickled down my temple as I clutched the steering wheel, my pulse racing. ((Weisberger 1)

In addition to expressing Andrea's physical uneasiness, this recurring mental monologue represents the unrelenting, mechanical character of Miranda's communication requirements. The driving is just like any other aspect of Runway: never ending demands, not enough support, and a mental load that doesn't differ much. In this case, whatever happens in this example is in a response to the way that Miranda's approach to leadership leaves Andrea to deal with the consequences by working it out herself. The tension is raised between Andrea and Miranda in the middle of a crisis as Miranda pursues the brusquely dismissive tone on the phone:

“Ahn-dre-ah! Ahn-dre-ah! Can you hear me, Ahn-dre-ah?” she trilled... “Where's my car? Did you drop it off at the garage yet? I need you to pick up Madelaine and drop her off at the apartment before you come back to the office.” ((Weisberger 1)

Andrea's stress intensifies not only due to Miranda's abrupt tone but also because the lean communication medium (as opposed to richer, face-to-face interaction) fails to convey the nuances necessary for effective understanding. In line with Media Richness Theory, an example where rich communication mediums are the only means of communication is conveying that such complex information, allowing someone to know if they 'understand' and whether you 'understand' what they seem to be 'understanding' and promoting 'understanding'. Andrea gets none of these things and is left with the depictions of an ambiguous and non-

existent instructions, as told to her via Miranda's terse phone call. While this happens, and Andrea has to guess and guess again, reducing her stress from a full plate, and it points out the error of Miranda's leading.

According to Human Relations Theory, Miranda's leadership style is authoritarian; she puts results ahead of her subordinates' welfare, dehumanizing them and treating them like nothing more than instruments to further her goals. Miranda is detached from her emotions giving her a way of dehumanizing Andrea so much that she no longer views Andrea as an asset on their team but instead as a tool of gain. Miranda reasons that fear and alienation are good for their children and completely neglects what's good for Andrea, so she comments down to Andrea as such a dear and bland daughter.

The erosion of Andrea's self-worth is a direct consequence of Miranda's lack of empathetic communication, reinforcing the dehumanizing effects of an authoritarian leadership style. This example starkly illustrates how such an abrasive leadership style can erode employee morale, ultimately undermining any genuine efforts to foster a supportive work environment. In addition to showing characters motivated by materialism and perfectionism, the story also demonstrates how these characteristics are used as tools to uphold hierarchical power and control. It becomes the culture of status, wealth, and outward appearance in the culture of organizations as well as in the culture of the power dynamics of the organization respectively.

The fight with the standard of Runway's is perfectly captured in Andrea's reflection over her damaged clothes. They symbolize the demands for appearance that cannot be rationalized on the grounds of practicality or personal comfort – this costly – but now utterly ruined – shoes having once been expensive:

“Shit! Another pair of seven-hundred-dollar shoes sacrificed to my complete and utter lack of grace under pressure... My fingers left wet streaks across the supple suede that swathed the tops of my now numb thighs.” (Weisberger 1)

Thus, the capture of this moment is of this very process, in which materially marked competence and worth enters within the organization. Sure, the sharpness of the tip lost money on the scratched shoes, though that's enough on its own. It's also that automatic judgment and the barely perceptible glares she receives as a result of Runway's posture of sleek perfectionism. Material symbols become such a means of control that they literally convert themselves into a way of control, forcing employees to absorb and to internalize the organization's values, devaluing substance for appearance.

Madonna Miranda Priestly goes to the limits, even to the pettiest of details, when giving gifts in rituals of giving. Emily's task is to decode what happens when unattainable expectations are tapped to even the most quotidian task:

“Miranda doesn't like the wrapping paper they use. I gave them this white paper last year, but they just didn't look as nice as when we do it.” ((Weisberger 4)

In fact, that whole obsessive attention to detail represents Runway more broadly. From Miranda's sense of perfection, fear culture proliferates, where subordinates focus on what she will like and how she can make a salvaging of what they had done. The emphasis is made in the control by a person or person placing arbitrary rules in order to make sure that you achieved trivial but exacting standards.

From a Human Relations theory point of view, these environments are non-collaborative, non-employee welfare oriented, but with the aim to achieve control and outcomes. If you don't achieve perfection and are subject to materialism, what you get is information that depletes employees and ends in resentment and burnout. With this leadership style, Miranda promotes a culture of competition and anxiety and of course lack of support and good workplace in which exaggerated errors become normal and successes that are diminished over time.

In addition, the materialism that Runway's culture was based on were superficial values. While employees are measured by how well they perform, they are judged based on their power to convey the idea of the brand that glued on the word, the wealth concept and sophistication. In these ways, Miranda manifests the power imbalance of subordination to the almost impossible standards of Miranda, with growing personal or financial penance.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, this all turns into a culture of insecurity and competition, but that is all based on Miranda Priestly's authoritarian leadership style that not only compels her subordinates to be rigid under all circumstances, but that does not allow creativity. The hierarchy at Runway exists to make its employees beat each other up, literally that last second so that they think of survival and no collaboration at all. Emily, senior assistant and Andrea form the epitome of their relationship, as it is with this toxic dynamic.

Emily's hostility to Andrea is even apparent in a sharp remark, and so on:

“You don't deserve this job. You're just the pity hire.” ((Weisberger 4)

This is just how Emily gets out of the soon to be deposed position in the fragile hierarchy which is Miranda. Andrea is a threat not a collegial unit, and the scarcity mindset permeates everywhere in the workplace. Andrea's missteps give Emily a chance to bask in the glow that every misstep clearly isn't her fault, and is

thus a way to reaffirm to herself and to Miranda that she played no part in any of that misstep, and that she's worked hard and was loyal to them; while Anderson's missteps make his standing precarious every time.

It also provides us with more clues why Emily decided to do what she did, in the form of an exchange where Emily says: "I've worked too hard to let you ruin this." And get rid of Emily claims Malfoy. Her words demonstrate how impossible she has to make this always possible, and how fear of failure compels her in so doing. However, this is explained in Human Relations theory as this is a human, natural response for any hierarchical workplace where emotional engagement and support is entirely absent. If leadership defaults to control over empathy, teams are left on their own, out there for the survival of the fittest.

However, most importantly, what is happening with Andrea is not a matter of Emily's personal spite as much as it is a dysfunction on Runway. Miranda's use of leadership style creates the competition of subordinates on purpose due to their dedication to her requirements. Miranda continually keeps her assistants insecure; and so, can deepen her authority and further not allow the unity of her profession. Workers who feel isolated and at odds with their teammates also spend energy trying to undermine each other, not helping them, and this increases stress.

Likewise, Runway and the contest it produces are already dehumanized by Miranda's autocratic nature. Emily's behaviour towards Diana is a direct result of the internalized fear and need to live up to the values of Miranda. We need to conform, to compete, which will take all the uniqueness out of the employee and lessen him to be a mere tool for the organization's power structure.

From a larger viewpoint, Emily and Andrea's dynamic demonstrates the persistence of workplaces full of toxicity. An oppressive leader internalizes his or herself, and after subordinates internalizing the oppressive leader Quality of values will also become complicit in such a cycle of reduction and dysfunction. According to the Human Relations Theory, such environments are criticized because they put together to the extent that they focus on productivity, and also over employee's well-being and collaboration rather than employee well-being and worker's collaboration at the expense of employee morale, long term success.

Miranda Priestly's inexorable growth in the demands she requires of you begins to permeate the deep psychological strain you must bear from working in the kind of high pressure, toxic environment Andrea senses. The story revolves around how Andrea degenerates from Runway fan and makes herself an embarrassed employee, willing to do anything by any means, to get her job back at any cost and a virtue less Miranda, who doesn't care either.

A single sharp example of the dehumanizing point of contact of Miranda's leadership is that Andrea is ordered to pass on harsh glory to a chef:

"I had no idea what to say or do... I felt like crying when she ordered me to tell him that he would never be a real chef anywhere besides some second-rate steak emporium, but I had done it." ((Weisberger 9)

It is in above scene, we see Miranda utilize her authority to not only make decisions on what happens, but what parts of the future are going to be enacted upon the emotional labour required in doing so. As a consequence of making Andrea serve as proxy Miranda's performance of delivering cruel criticism, the burden of moral and emotional consequence is set on her. The dynamics of such a scenario are the despairing mode of Miranda leadership style towards subordinates, they do not regard them as human but as 'tools' to achieve a result and ignore the emotional limits of these people.

Although emotionally distant leaders may be good, such leaders are against human relations theory for the benefit of making people in the workplace like, respect and understand each other. Miranda, or perhaps unwillingly having not been able to go beyond the emotional consequences of her demands, creates, chances inclination, guilt, and resentment among her team.

In respect to and because of Miranda's personal life, regardless of Andrea being disrespected again and again, there is this power imbalance which is being given prestige in the relationship. When Miranda does, she comes up with dismissive and authoritative thing to say to interrupt her plan with friends:

"I'm sure your friend will understand. This is more important." ((Weisberger 1)

And here, yet another boundary has been made to seem breached in Andrea's hallmark of toxicity, the personal and professional life of toxic leadership. But when Miranda is more selfishly focusing on her needs rather than listening to Andrea's autonomy, she in turn gives Miranda her power over asking for a more total subservient use of her. Slowly, Andrea is beginning to wonder if the trade is worth the price in relationships, and how she feels living as the role she has lived her entire life.

However, among all of her conforming, Andrea finally learns how misaligned she is with Runway's values. On a charity gala Andrea gets to reflect back about her superficial transformation:

"I look like them now. But I'm not one of them." ((Weisberger 7)

For this moment, Andrea's journey is coming to a crossroads. Although she wears the successful image of the glamorous, outwardly theatrical Runway, she knows this is only the externalized role, that she also is not part

of who she really is, not a part of her core value; she is not what she is. That realization finally drives her to go on Runway to be free.

Then Andrea resigns as a defiant act of sabotage against the toxic power we have all gotten used to living. She questions Miranda point blank, and says:

“You know what, Miranda? I don’t care if I’m letting you down. I’m done.” ((Weisberger 17)

This is a big rebellion on many levels. Human Relations Theory embraces that, Andrea chose to opt for walking away from a system based on alienation and external validation, to get back to placing emotional well-being over external validation. Andrea decides to exit Runway because she is not willing to subsist that experience for one that is less dehumanizing and more well-rounded in life.

Moreover, Andrea’s resignation was due to also being noted in the theory of Media Richness Theory which means face to face. Having laid the message such an intensified process she is also equally assuring that once out of the corridor her message will also be clear, sharp and definitive. Yet, in spite of that, Miranda is the one to fight against the oppressive context and the traditional battle between Andrea and Miranda makes sense.

The description of the different power relations between Miranda Priestly and her two assistants as a function of the climatization of the fashion industry, shows the basis for the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*. An example of how it sets itself up is the particular scene early in the story creating a clear harassed picture of the tasks Andrea is required to fulfil. But why would one do something like that, whirls around Miranda as she issues an unmistakable authority and impatience instruction to a rather simple errand Andrea is to go and do — and do so immediately. I asked you specifically to bring there both of them to the office because the girls will be here and we shall have to leave to. As usual, Miranda does not let Andrea finish and protests: “Enough.” I have a relaxed attitude towards your incompetence; I will care about those blows when I’m actually struck on the chin. As you have to go get car and puppy and bring them up to here. I think that it will take us fifteen minutes to get us ready to leave. Understood?” This will also suggest that Miranda is an authoritarian figure as she adds more stress in her subordinates and the portrayal of Miranda will be similar to one who cannot cope with the high expectations under pressure.

However, Emily also describes what the job involves, adding to this the idea that it is difficult, as there can be no doubt about that. You will work fourteen-hour days, not so often as you know, but so far as you are concerned often enough. We have to point out that there will be no editorial activities, and then. Though Miranda has recruited you and will be your mentor in this case, you have to predict and fulfil all of her needs and requirements as a junior assistant of Miranda. By bringing this to life so well through the words of her, it is clear too how all orientated the workplace is every day, an indication of just how much authority Miranda has over her employees (Weisberger 7).

And other aspects of Miranda’s presence are on full display when, in the one interruption of the phone call, it is cut short by an outside influence and Miranda commands ‘Ahn-dre-ah, the stewardess is making me put down this phone,’ in front of her passengers. Once the stewardess will allow me to make that call, I will call you back. And while I need hair and makeup YES please start advertising and looking for new girls for the nanny position. That’s all.” She requires them to be around but she colonizes them little and demand that they be available to her anywhere and at any time she wants them (Weisberger 154).

A second powerful moment comes when Miranda orders them to answer immediately to her: “I mean like, Hello, I have been phoning you all along now to let you all know that I have had to have my lunch and I want it now. Emily, I’ve never seen there be much of a place for subtlety at work. I. Want. My. Lunch. Now!” The word stress in this demand is stressed in the demanding voice, creating an emphasis on these extreme aspects of demands and stress created by them that are suggestive of the psychological cost of such leadership to the employee (Weisberger 113).

The given examples from the novel exemplify the gravest difficulties faced by someone working in defensive organizational culture characterized by bureaucracy, stress, and oppression by the likes of Otis Blackwell, a person who works for a tough boss who imposition absurdly high expectation from people under him. By providing rich understanding of how the pathology of power in the workplace can affect the satisfaction and health of employees, they give a lens to consider grim realities of the ugly leadership in the fashion industry. That’s the rate that psychology costs you in order to get by, to let yourself just keep turning up hours late to hide in a room, day in and day out, watching Andrea try to push through, quite literally try to gyrate through, all this hierarchy, this power dynamic. While they are very good at generating outcomes, the dysfunctional style of leadership that Miranda’s is so debilitating, that it produces this workplace that sends out malign signals to leave stress, alienation, and burnout.

By studying the power dynamics in Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada*, the magnitude of the destructive power exercised by authoritarian leaders within a high-pressure field is clearly revealed. Miranda Priestly and her assistants are a model of a rigorous, often punitive form of management that demands control

over empathy, based on extreme hierarchy that is both demanding and illogically demanding. Miranda is such a nightmarish boss that not only does she make the workplace stress increase, but she also kills the entire morale and well-being of her employees.

Through every dialogue and scenario throughout the narrative, Miranda's never-ending pursuit of perfection plays a key part of Runway's toxic culture. For example, the way in which she issues curt directives as to everyday tasks, putting Andrea and such other assistants through tortuous stress is also an indication of something else plaguing corporate cultures where you seem to define leadership by controlling everything. It does not only stop creativity; it is also a part of a cycle of fear and compliance. This pervasive disconnect is highlighted in the detailed descriptions of these interactions, supported by theories of Human Relations and Media Richness, and reveals the leader and team to be operating from such a space where misunderstanding and miscommunication abound.

Although the novel also criticizes the materialistic ideals of the fashion industry, Runway's power dynamics are emphasized by the rigid, image-centric rules that propagate and uphold these ideals. The extent to which these values have been housed within Runway's organizational culture is indicated by the emphasis on outward appearances and their brand image rather than on substantive personal achievements or wellbeing. This culture does not only change the lives of employees professionally, but also impacts their personal identities and they often confuse self-worth with work achievements.

Moreover, the novel *The Devil Wears Prada* is also associated with another communication tool being used in Runway magazine – the "Bulletin." Indeed, this is a centralized medium that disseminates information and instructions through Oshibanya text-based medium. She mentions that I 'double clicked on the icon on my sleek turquoise iMac called 'Bulletin' and skimmed over its contents thus far' (149). The small interaction that the authors had with the Bulletin reveals some of how the Bulletin fits into the organization.

Miranda Priestly's communication style in *The Devil Wears Prada* employs a mix of rich and lean media to maintain authority. The approach, which often involves harsh directives, reinforces a rigid power dynamic that limits individual autonomy and enforces compliance. Various communication channels, ranging from immediate and simple to impersonal and centralized, are utilized to enhance control and operational efficiency, aligning with Media Richness Theory.

This analysis illustrates the hierarchy and power dynamics within Runway's workplace communication, showcasing the deliberate fusion of power with organizational effectiveness. Although effective in maintaining control, this method prompts questions about its impact on workplace morale and productivity. The narrative deepens understanding of interpersonal dynamics and broadens perspectives on how communication operates within a high-pressure corporate setting.

Ultimately, *The Devil Wears Prada* highlights the perils of a work environment dominated by imbalanced power dynamics. It advocates for a shift in leadership style—one that balances authority with empathy and respects personal boundaries. The analysis underscores the necessity for leaders to cultivate an environment fostering mutual understanding and respect, which benefits both employees and the organization. By portraying the challenges faced by Andrea and her colleagues at Runway, the novel offers critical insights into the detrimental effects of toxic leadership and calls urgently for more humane management practices across all sectors.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Devil Wears Prada* reveals how communication, far from being neutral, is deeply political within organizational contexts. Through the theories of Human Relations and Media Richness, it becomes evident that Miranda Priestly's leadership style weaponizes communication to maintain dominance and control, often at the expense of employee autonomy and well-being. Andrea Sachs's experiences showcase the emotional degradation that follows when empathy is excluded from managerial practice.

The novel critiques not only the toxic leadership embodied by Miranda but also the cultural values of appearance, perfectionism, and competition that *Runway* upholds. It shows how employees are often reduced to instruments of brand identity, leading to stress, burnout, and identity erosion. By the novel's end, Andrea's decision to leave signifies a reclaiming of agency, echoing the core of Human Relations Theory: that employee well-being must not be sacrificed for productivity.

Ultimately, Weisberger's work stands as a narrative warning about the psychological costs of unchecked authority and the urgent need for organizational cultures that prioritize empathy, communication clarity, and human connection.

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