

Influence of Social Media on Fashion Trends Among Youth

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Introduction:

Fashion has always been shaped by the culture around it, but the mechanism through which trends travel has changed dramatically over the past decade. Where earlier generations looked to runway shows, fashion magazines, and film for style cues, today's youth increasingly look to their phone screens. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Pinterest have become the primary spaces where young people discover, evaluate, and adopt new styles, turning ordinary users, influencers, and celebrities alike into tastemakers. This shift has not only accelerated the speed at which trends emerge and fade, but has also reshaped how youth relate to clothing, identity, and self-image, with consequences that extend well beyond what is fashionable to wear.

Social Media as the New Runway

Recent industry research indicates that social media has firmly overtaken traditional channels as the leading source of fashion inspiration for young consumers. A recent youth-focused study found that social media platforms are now the top source of fashion

inspiration, with roughly 43 percent of young shoppers turning to platforms like Instagram and TikTok to discover new trends, ahead of physical stores, online retailers, and word of mouth combined. TikTok in particular has emerged as what many in the industry describe as a trend accelerator, where a distinctive outfit featured in a viral video or dance challenge can spread to a global audience within hours rather than the months it once took a style to move from runway to retail shelf. Instagram, meanwhile, continues to function as a highly visual, aspirational space where curated posts, Reels, and influencer collaborations shape everyday style choices, while Pinterest serves as a mood-board style platform where users actively search for and save style inspiration, reporting well over 570 million monthly active users globally.

From Discovery to Purchase: The Influencer Economy

Social media's influence on fashion extends well beyond inspiration into the act of purchasing itself. Influencer marketing has become central to how fashion brands reach

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younger audiences, with data suggesting that on affiliate shopping platforms, influencer-driven content can account for a very large share of referral traffic to major retailers. Reports from the 2025 fashion season noted that certain social media personalities achieved engagement rates exceeding 10 percent, outperforming many traditional fashion influencers, with their followers not merely consuming their content but actively emulating their outfits and purchasing habits. Nearly half of TikTok's user base has reported making a purchase after encountering a fashion product within the app's content, reflecting how thoroughly social commerce has merged the discovery and buying stages of the fashion journey. Analysts expect social commerce in fashion retail to continue growing rapidly, with U.S. retail social commerce alone projected to reach tens of billions of dollars, much of it driven by fashion and lifestyle categories.

Democratisation and Diversification of Style

One of the more positive dimensions of social media's influence is the democratisation of fashion authority. Trends today can originate from virtually anywhere — a college student's outfit video, a thrift-store haul, or a niche subculture community — rather than being dictated solely by luxury houses or fashion capitals. This has allowed a much wider range of aesthetics, body types, and cultural influences to gain visibility, and has

given rise to distinctly digital-native trend cycles, such as 'coastal grandmother', 'clean girl', or various 'core' aesthetics, that spread almost entirely through social platforms before entering mainstream retail. Social media has also become an important space for youth to explore and express identity, including gender expression, as many young people increasingly use fashion as a tool to challenge rigid style norms and highlight inclusivity.

The Darker Side: Body Image, Comparison, and Overconsumption

Alongside these positive shifts, a substantial body of research has documented troubling effects of fashion-oriented social media use on youth wellbeing. Constant exposure to curated, filtered, and often unrealistic images of appearance has been linked to increased body dissatisfaction among adolescents, with reviews of international studies consistently finding that frequent social media use correlates with heightened body image concerns, particularly among girls and young women, though a meaningful proportion of adolescent boys report similar dissatisfaction with their own bodies. Trends such as 'body checking' content and appearance-focused challenges have been identified as particularly harmful, encouraging young users to seek validation through comparison of their weight, size, and shape against idealised online imagery.

The speed at which social media accelerates fashion cycles has also been linked to overconsumption. The rapid churn of 'micro-trends' popularised on TikTok and Instagram encourages frequent, low-cost purchases that are often discarded after only a few wears, feeding directly into the fast fashion model and its associated environmental and labour concerns. Researchers studying the mental health dimensions of this cycle have noted that the pursuit of ever-changing trends, combined with social pressure to keep up appearances online, can contribute to financial strain and diminished self-esteem among young consumers, even as the act of purchasing itself may offer a brief and temporary mood lift.

Platform-Specific Dynamics

- 👉 TikTok: Functions as the fastest-moving trend accelerator, where short-form video, viral sounds, and hashtag challenges can turn a single outfit or styling idea into a global trend within days.
- 👉 Instagram: Operates as a more curated, aspirational platform, where Reels, influencer partnerships, and shoppable posts blend lifestyle content with direct retail links.
- 👉 Pinterest: Serves as a planning and mood-board space where users proactively search for and save style

inspiration, often at an earlier stage of the discovery process than TikTok or Instagram.

- 👉 YouTube: Hosts longer-form content such as clothing hauls, styling tutorials, and 'get ready with me' videos that allow for deeper engagement with a creator's personal style philosophy.

Implications for the Fashion and Textile Industry

For designers, retailers, and textile professionals, the growing influence of social media on youth fashion carries significant implications. Production and design cycles are under pressure to move faster to keep pace with trends that can emerge and fade within weeks, placing additional strain on supply chains and increasing the appeal of fast, low-cost manufacturing. At the same time, brands that successfully engage with youth-driven platforms are also using them to promote more positive shifts, including sustainability messaging, secondhand and resale culture, and body-inclusive marketing, suggesting that the same platforms driving overconsumption can also be leveraged to encourage more responsible fashion choices when used thoughtfully.

Conclusion

Social media has fundamentally transformed how fashion trends are created, spread, and consumed among youth, replacing

the slower, top-down model of runway-to-retail with a fast, peer-driven, algorithm-shaped ecosystem. This shift has democratised style influence and given young people unprecedented creative agency over their fashion choices, but it has also introduced real risks, from heightened body image pressures to a culture of disposable, trend-chasing consumption. As social media's role in fashion continues to deepen, the challenge for educators, brands, and platforms alike will be to harness its power for creativity and inclusivity while addressing its capacity to fuel comparison, overconsumption, and mental health strain among the young people who engage with it most.

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