

The Transformation of Fashion Expression in the Social Media Era

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Abstract: The rise of social media has fundamentally transformed fashion expression, shifting from a traditionally elite-driven model to a user-generated and community-driven culture. Algorithmic recommendations, visual engagement, and influencer marketing have contributed to the emergence of the "seeding economy" and "persona-driven consumption," where fashion trends spread rapidly through digital platforms. This shift has significantly influenced young consumers' fashion choices, encouraging them to engage with trends in new ways. However, it has also given rise to issues such as fast fashion, aesthetic homogenization, and consumption anxiety, as individuals feel pressured to keep up with rapidly changing trends. Moreover, the "filtered culture" of social media reinforces identity dilemmas, where users seek self-expression while simultaneously conforming to standardized beauty ideals. This article mainly discusses, against this backdrop, how people's fashion expressions on social media shape and influence identity, as well as how social media promotes fashion consumption.

Keywords: Social Media, Fashion, Identity, Consumption

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the internet and social networks, people have gradually shifted from traditional media to new media, with social media emerging as the primary platform for news consumption, information acquisition, and interactive communication. According to the 54th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of June 2024, the number of internet users in China has reached nearly 1.1 billion. The data indicates that the country has gained 7.42 million new internet users, with the majority comprising teenagers aged 10–19 (49.0%) and older adults (50–59 years old accounting for 15.2%, while those aged 60 and above make up 20.8%) [1].

Social media refers to internet-based digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and exchange information [2]. Compared to traditional media, social media is characterized by decentralized dissemination, user-generated content (UGC), social interactivity, and algorithm-driven recommendations [3]. In the social media era, the rapid spread of information allows individual users to directly influence popular culture and consumption trends, thereby reshaping the way fashion is expressed [4].

The evolution of social media has undergone multiple stages, from early blogs and forums to social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, Weibo), and eventually to visually oriented social platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) [5]. The widespread adoption of these platforms has facilitated the

globalization of fashion discourse while simultaneously making fashion expression more personalized and diversified. In particular, the rise of short videos and live streaming has enabled the instant and dynamic production and dissemination of fashion content, contributing to the formation of a “visual social era.”

Fashion is not only an embodiment of individual style but also a socio-cultural phenomenon encompassing clothing, makeup, accessories, and lifestyle choices. Traditionally, fashion trends were dictated by luxury brands, designers, celebrities, and professional fashion media, disseminated through offline fashion shows, magazines, and television advertisements [6]. However, the advent of social media has disrupted this top-down dissemination model, allowing fashion communication to shift towards a bottom-up approach, where ordinary users can shape and lead fashion trends.

In the social media era, fashion trends are increasingly shaped by user interactions and the network effect of social platforms [3]. For example, the #OOTD (Outfit of the Day) trend on TikTok, fashion-sharing posts on Red, and fashion influencer content on Instagram are all user-driven phenomena that impact broader audiences. Furthermore, recommendation algorithms amplify the reach of fashion content, ensuring that both mainstream and niche styles gain exposure rather than solely promoting established brands.

In the era of social media, it is crucial to explore how young people obtain identity through fashion expression and how this expression drives fashion consumption. However, attention should also be paid to the fashion anxiety and aesthetic anxiety that social media brings.

2. Fashion expression on social media: a new form of symbolic interaction

2.1. Fashion as a tool for identity construction

Fashion expression on social media has a profound impact on identity construction. According to symbolic interactionism theory, individuals' behaviors and interactions carry specific meanings within a given social and cultural context. In this context, physical and social objects (including people) and situations must be defined or categorized based on individuals' interpretations [7]. These meanings emerge from social interactions and are continuously created and redefined through interpretation.

Social media provides an environment for users to express themselves freely without concern for external judgment. When individuals share similar perspectives, they naturally categorize themselves into like-minded groups. For instance, empirical studies indicate that Qatari youth use social media to express their thoughts and emotions about national celebrations, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging to Qatari society and culture. In this process, “patriotic sentiment” becomes a symbolic marker of interaction and categorization [8].

On platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Red, fashion expression takes various forms, including showcasing daily outfits and sharing styling choices. For instance, fashion influencers on Instagram often establish distinctive fashion aesthetics, such as Y2K, Japanese casual style, or minimalist fashion. Users tend to emulate styles they resonate with, thereby categorizing themselves within a particular fashion community. This process assigns symbolic meaning to fashion styles, allowing users to quickly identify with specific aesthetics while seeking recognition within their chosen social circles [9].

2.2. The dynamics of "watching" and "being watched" on social media

The uses and gratifications theory suggests that individuals engage with media to satisfy specific needs, which are influenced by social and psychological factors. Two key conditions must be met for media engagement: (1) the availability of material resources for media access and (2) the perceived

effectiveness of media in fulfilling users' needs, based on prior media experiences. Whether or not users' needs are met influences their future media choices and behaviors [10].

Research has identified several motivations for social media usage: social interaction (88%), information seeking (80%), passing time (76%), entertainment (64%), relaxation (60%), communication (56%), opinion expression (56%), convenience (52%), information sharing (40%), and monitoring others (20%) [11]. Users engage with social media by following influencers whose content aligns with their interests. However, fashion expression on social media is not solely driven by personal aesthetics but also by the pursuit of attention and validation. This creates a dynamic of mutual engagement through likes, comments, shares, and recommendations, satisfying the dual needs of “watching” and “being watched.”

Cultural capital suggests that individuals can gain social recognition through fashion consumption and aesthetic preferences. On Red, certain brands, styles, or items such as Maison Margiela’s ballet flats, Miu Miu’s miniskirts, and New Balance 550 sneakers become trend symbols. Owning these items signifies higher fashion discourse power, leading to greater social recognition.

3. How social media shapes fashion consumption

3.1. "Seeding" economy and fashion consumption decisions

On social media, users can become influential creators—commonly known as "internet celebrities"—by producing high-quality content and sharing their ideas. These individuals not only attract large followings but also leverage social media's interactive mechanisms to establish their personal brands, ultimately influencing consumers' purchasing decisions. With the continuous development of social media, these creators have become essential marketing resources for brands and companies, providing new promotional channels and serving as valuable social capital for collaboration, thereby shaping a new marketing ecosystem [12].

Within this ecosystem, social media recommendation algorithms and interactive features play a crucial role. Some researchers have employed “eye-tracking technology” to measure subjects' attention distribution while browsing recommended content on social media, revealing that visually appealing and highly interactive product-sharing content is more likely to capture users' attention and ultimately influence their purchasing decisions. In other words, the visual presentation and interactive design of content are critical factors in social media marketing. High-quality images, engaging video editing, intuitive product demonstrations, and real-time interactions between creators and users all contribute to increased consumer interest, thereby enhancing purchase conversion rates.

Furthermore, behavioral experiments have shown that product recommendations on short-video platforms are more likely to trigger impulsive purchases compared to text-and-image content. This phenomenon is closely related to the immersive nature of short videos and their ability to induce immediate consumption. Short videos utilize rapid scene transitions, vivid contextual demonstrations, and emotionally driven narratives to quickly stimulate consumers’ desire to buy. For example, when a pair of Y2K-style vintage jeans is recommended by multiple key opinion leaders (KOLs) on platforms such as Red or TikTok, it can rapidly become a trending item, sparking imitation-based consumption among young audiences. This process, in which individual sharing evolves into widespread trends, represents the core mechanism through which social media influences fashion consumption.

From a consumer psychology perspective, product-sharing content on social media often capitalizes on social recognition and herd mentality. When users see that their favorite KOLs or friends are recommending a particular product, they are more likely to perceive it as worth purchasing, leading to actual consumer behavior. Additionally, short-video platforms’ algorithmic recommendation systems play a significant role in this process. By precisely targeting users with

similar product-sharing content, these platforms continuously reinforce consumer tendencies, ultimately driving purchasing behavior. This mechanism not only enhances the commercial value of social media but also further shapes contemporary fashion consumption trends.

3.2. Personal branding and consumer behavior

In the social media environment, “persona-building” has become one of the most important strategies in brand marketing. Both brands and individuals strategically cultivate a specific image over time to influence consumers’ sense of identification with their products and, ultimately, their purchasing decisions. This approach leverages the psychological tendency of consumers to engage with brands or influencers whose values, aesthetics, and lifestyles align with their own. By consistently maintaining a recognizable persona, brands and key opinion leaders can strengthen their influence and establish long-term consumer loyalty [13].

KOLs, in particular, play a crucial role in this marketing strategy. By continuously producing content that adheres to a specific style—such as minimalism, streetwear, or vintage fashion—they construct a distinct form of “social capital.” This capital is built through consistent audience engagement, fostering trust and credibility among their followers. When KOLs maintain a cohesive personal brand, their recommendations appear more authentic and persuasive, thereby increasing the likelihood that consumers will adopt their preferences and purchasing behaviors. For example, a fashion influencer known for promoting minimalist aesthetics can shape their audience’s perception of what constitutes “elegance” and “quality.” As a result, when they collaborate with a brand that aligns with their established aesthetic, their followers are more inclined to view the brand’s products as a reflection of those same qualities, enhancing the brand’s appeal and market value.

Beyond KOL-driven marketing, celebrity endorsements and brand collaborations are also essential components of persona-based marketing. Many luxury brands, for instance, strategically partner with specific celebrities to reinforce their high-end image and attract a targeted consumer demographic. By associating with a particular celebrity’s persona, a brand can leverage the celebrity’s existing fan base and cultural influence to enhance its desirability. For example, if a luxury fashion house collaborates with a renowned actor known for their sophisticated and elegant public image, the brand’s association with that persona strengthens its perceived exclusivity and prestige. Similarly, when streetwear brands collaborate with musicians or athletes who embody an urban, rebellious, or energetic persona, they successfully position themselves within specific subcultures, making their products more appealing to a defined consumer segment.

Moreover, the rise of social media has enabled brands to create their own digital personas, further integrating this strategy into their marketing approach. Through carefully curated content, storytelling, and interactive campaigns, brands can project distinct personalities that resonate with their target audiences. For instance, some brands adopt a playful and humorous persona on platforms like TikTok to engage younger consumers, while others maintain a sleek and aspirational aesthetic on Instagram to attract luxury shoppers.

Overall, persona-driven marketing has become a powerful tool in the social media era, blurring the lines between individual influencers and corporate branding. By maintaining consistent identities, brands and influencers deepen consumer engagement, foster emotional connections, and drive purchases. As social media continues to evolve, persona-building will remain a central pillar of digital marketing, shaping how consumers interact with and perceive brands in the long run.

4. Fashion anxiety and identity dilemmas in the social media era

4.1. Fast fashion and consumption anxiety

On platforms like Red, TikTok, and Instagram, fashion consumption has evolved into a central aspect of lifestyle representation. Social media promotes an aspirational way of living where personal style signifies social status and cultural capital. Brands, influencers, and KOLs drive this ecosystem through “must-buy lists” and trending items, creating urgency among young consumers to stay relevant. The algorithm-driven nature of these platforms further reinforces this trend cycle, as personalized recommendations continuously push new fashion items, encouraging impulsive consumption [14].

The rapid turnover of fashion trends on social media fosters anxiety among young consumers, many of whom feel pressured to update their wardrobes constantly. Limited-edition releases, viral clothing pieces, and micro-trends that emerge and fade within weeks contribute to a culture of excessive spending. Young consumers, eager to maintain their online fashion persona, may find themselves caught in a cycle of overconsumption, driven by the fear of being perceived as outdated or unfashionable.

Beyond financial pressure, the “filtered culture” of social media exacerbates beauty anxiety among young people. Through carefully edited images, flattering camera angles, reinforcing a narrow and often unrealistic standard of beauty. As a result, individuals who do not conform to these aesthetic ideals may experience feelings of social exclusion, self-doubt, and even body dissatisfaction. The pursuit of a “perfect fashion image” can impact self-esteem, leading to extreme dieting, cosmetic procedures, or excessive photo editing.

Ultimately, while social media platforms provide a space for creative fashion expression and personal branding, they also contribute to heightened consumer anxiety and rigid beauty standards. Addressing these issues requires critical media literacy, ethical influencer practices, and inclusive representations. Encouraging diverse aesthetics and promoting mindful consumption could help young people embrace fashion as self-expression rather than a source of stress.

5. Conclusion

The advent of the social media era has profoundly reshaped the trajectory and logic of youth fashion expression. It provides unprecedented space for self-presentation while fostering a new ecosystem of fashion production and consumption through algorithmic recommendations, visual interaction, and community-based dissemination.

First, fashion expression has shifted from being “elite-driven” to “user-generated.” Through short videos and image-based content, young individuals transform fashion into symbolic interaction. The revival of Y2K, minimalism, and niche subcultures illustrates how personal aesthetics evolve into collective cultural symbols. Fashion is not just personal taste but a tool for identity construction and community boundary-making. Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” is reflected in likes, comments, and shares, which now indicate fashion discourse power.

Second, the commercialization of social media has given rise to both the “recommendation economy” and “persona-driven consumption.” Influencers and algorithms turn fashion into an emotionally driven experience, where users emulate styles to project their “ideal self.” However, this traffic-driven consumer culture also accelerates fashion’s disposability, aesthetic homogenization, and the perpetual anxiety of “always lacking one more piece,” revealing the contradiction between expressive freedom and capital-driven desire reproduction.

Finally, the “filtered” nature of social media amplifies the identity dilemmas faced by young people. The gap between online personas and reality, echo chamber effects, and reinforced beauty

standards transform fashion from self-expression into bodily discipline. Within the cycle of “watching” and “being watched,” young individuals seek validation while struggling against aesthetic constraints. Future research should address two key issues: first, how technological advancements (such as the metaverse and AI-generated content) will redefine the boundaries of fashion expression; second, how to strike a balance between commercial logic and individual autonomy in order to cultivate a more inclusive and critically engaged fashion culture. Enhancing media literacy and embracing diverse aesthetics may help mitigate fashion anxiety. Ultimately, fashion should be a medium of creativity and freedom, not constraint.

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