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Fashion Cultures

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Digital Threads:

An Exploration of Social Media and Its Impact on Personal Fashion Styling

Fashion styling can be defined as an act of expression. For centuries, fashion has acted as a tangible extension of one's inner self, serving as an instrument for self-expression and "...framework for understanding how we express ourselves through dress in everyday life."¹ With the emergence of social media and the digital aesthetic in recent years, there has been a fundamental change in the expression of fashion styling, creating new opportunities for originality, self-discovery, and self-promotion.² It has evolved into a platform where individuals can communicate their "relation to society, and how people present themselves to others."³ As a result, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and various other social media platforms have begun to affect this everyday practice. In order to understand the prevalent impact that social media and digital technology have had on contemporary fashion styling, one must examine how these platforms have shaped the way we choose to present ourselves to the world through these digital threads.

¹ Marie Riegels Melchior, "Fashion Blogging and Aspirational Identity: Negotiating Aspirational Self-Fashioning through Fashion Blogs," in *The Fashion Studies Handbook*, ed. Annette Lynch and Elizabeth Wissinger (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), <https://www-bloomsburyfashioncentral-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/encyclopedia-chapter?docid=b-9781350115927&tocid=b-9781350115927-chapter2&pdfid=9781350115927.ch-002.pdf>, 14.

² Arianne Schnettler, "The In-Between State of Transgender: Gender, Fashion, and Social Media in the Digital Age," *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 6, no. 3 (2019): 369-385, https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc_00007_1, 372.

³ Jo Jenkinson, "*Wear Your Identity': Styling Identities of Youth Through Dress – A Conceptual Model*," *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2020): 73-99, DOI: https://doi-org.libproxy.newschool.edu/10.1386/fspc_00006_1, 74.

Digital Threads is a visual essay website that tackles questions about the social, economic, and cultural impact that social media has had on contemporary fashion styling.

Fashion styling has frequently been used throughout history and various cultures to reinforce existing hierarchies by signaling one's social rank and wealth. As noted by historian Susan Brown, in *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*, "...leisured and merchant classes could imitate noble fashions. Such mimicry of their betters prompted litigation: laws were introduced to control what people at different social levels could wear."⁴ While the dynamic between the industry and the consumer has always been based on hierarchy, by the late 2000s and early 2010s, the introduction of social media would drastically transform the fashion industry. Not only did social media provide an outlet for people to express their individuality, but it "... made an elitist industry more accessible and relatable to everyday consumers."⁵

Over the past decade, social media has changed the trajectory of the fashion landscape through the rise of influencer culture. Social media influencers have been defined as a "...type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media."⁶ In an interview with Fatima Hassan J H Al-Jaber; a fashion TikTok influencer, she discussed upon her experiences with social media and the effects it has had on her

⁴ Susan Brown, "*The Definitive History of Costume and Style*". Smithsonian Institution PK Publishing I Vol 1st American ed. DK, (2012).

<https://search-ebshost-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=491488&site=ehost-live&scope=site>, 60.

⁵ Leila Durmaz, "The Role of Social Media in the Fashion Industry: How Fashion Blogging Encourages Two-Way Symmetrical Communication" (June 2014): 1-62, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1081&context=joursp>, 1.

⁶ Karen Freberg, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey, and Laura A. Freberg, "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality," Elsevier 37, no. 1 (2011): <https://www-sciencedirect-com.libproxy.newschool.edu/science/article/pii/S0363811110001207>, 90.

personal style. When asked about how she uses social media to express her own style, she said, "It's just a platform where I get to be like, "Ok, this is where I am at right now," because my style reflects my emotions or just the phase of my life in that moment." And that social media is "...also just a good way to see how my style has evolved in each era of my life," she added.⁷ The growth of influencer culture and social media has led to the emergence of new forms of self-expression and creative inquiry within fashion.

Influencer culture has been recognized as having an impact on fashion by notable personalities, with Anna Wintour welcoming the shift brought about by social media and attributing it to expanding Vogue's reach.⁸ Through a survey I conducted and posted, on how others utilize social media to express their sense of style, it was found that many people use these platforms as a way of capturing their journey through fashion and visual storytelling.⁹ As a result of the documentation of their own takes on fashion trends and styling, influencers and their followers have developed a relationship that has elevated them to celebrity status. Despite the fact that social media is frequently used as a means of self-expression, it's critical to acknowledge the damages it has caused in regards to individuals and the environment.

Throughout social media, discussions on the loss of individuality and personal style have been credited to the overconsumption of media. In an interview, stylist Avena Gallagher spoke about the unfortunate impact social media has had on the acceleration of trends.¹⁰ Due to the

⁷Fatima Hassan J H Al-Jaber, "Digital Threads: Interview with Toomy," by Oluschi Harmon (2023).

⁸ Katie Goldsmith, "Anna Wintour Discusses Fashion Bloggers, Irving Penn, and Hamish Bowles's Surfing Lesson," The Cut, New York Magazine, 7 April 2010, https://www.thecut.com/2010/04/anna_wintour_on_bloggers_irvin.html.

⁹ Oluschi Harmon, "Digital Threads" (Google Forms: Google, 2023).

¹⁰ Whitney Mallett, "Avena Gallagher, Covertly Styling Your Cultural Experience," Topical Cream, 19 June 2019, <https://topicalcream.org/features/avena-gallagher-covertly-styling-your-cultural-experience/>.

consistent push for what is new and trendy, the fast fashion model of the industry has raised "concerns about clothing companies taking responsibility for their impact on the environment," workforce, and suppliers."¹¹ The decisions made by companies to push influencers to promote fast fashion have led to the treatment of consumers "...the lowest-priced garments as nearly disposable, discarding them after just seven or eight wears."¹² As the fashion industry and consumers continue to grapple with these concerns, it is essential to recognize the role that social media has played in shaping individual styles and the industry as a whole.

Fashion styling is an expressive act that has evolved over time with the prevalence of social media and digital technology in our society. In the ever-going understanding of personal style, one should be able to develop it by "taking inspiration from others while still expressing yourself and wearing what makes you feel good."¹³ As fashion continues to evolve, it remains a framework for understanding how we express ourselves through dress in everyday life, providing ways in which "people use dress to navigate through, or around, different social, cultural, and geographical boundaries."¹⁴ Through Digital Threads, individuals can gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted effects that social media has had on the process of cultivating personal style.

¹¹ Brown, *"The Definitive History of Costume and Style"*, 415

¹² Nathalie Remy, Eveline Speelman, and Steven Swartz, "Style that's sustainable: A new fast-fashion formula," McKinsey & Company, October 20, 2016, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula>.

¹³ Erin Corridon, "Bella Bots, Matilda Minions, and Personal Style," STITCH, 29 November 2022, <http://www.stitchfashion.com/home//bella-bots-matilda-minions-and-personal-style#:~:text=It%20refers%20to%20a%20TikTok,the%20Swedish%20influencer%20Matilda%20Djerf>.

¹⁴ Jenkinson, *"Wear Your Identity"*, 79.

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