



FROM LIKES TO PURCHASES

How Social Media Shapes Trends, Brands, and Consumer Choices

BY: AINSLEY COUNCE

Have you ever been scrolling on social media and found yourself stumbling upon a new trend with each swipe? In a world where we are constantly bombarded with ads and influencer marketing, it can feel overwhelming to keep up with all the latest trends. In a world where TikTok videos and Instagram influencers dictate what's 'in' and 'out' at lightning speed, fast fashion has become a race against time—and social media is firmly in the driver's seat. But how is this digital whirlwind shaping consumer habits, brand loyalty, and the future of fashion?"

Fashion has always been a topic of interest in my life. From everyday clothing, to runway looks, to Broadway costumes, I've always found myself intrigued by the world of fashion. As a current IMC student at the University of Mississippi, I was also interested to learn about the world of influencer marketing and social media's impact. This led to me to question if the two were intertwined, do they impact one another, and how do they correlate. For these reasons, I chose the topic of social media's impact on fashion marketing for my research class.



In order to conduct my research, I went through a 3 step process. The process began with background research from academic journals. Next, I conducted a focus group with my fellow classmates. Finally, I sent out a survey to my peers. The results led me to a deeper understanding of fashion marketing.



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FAST FASHION TRENDS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The fashion industry has been dramatically reshaped by the rise of social media, which now serves as a critical driver of trends, marketing strategies, and consumer behavior. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest have introduced an unprecedented speed to the trend cycle, enabling consumers to instantly discover, embrace, and discard styles. This shift has created both opportunities and challenges for brands and consumers alike.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Throughout my background research process, I found that research confirms that social media's impact on consumer preferences is profound. According to Emma (2024), "Findings indicate that social media significantly influences consumer preferences and purchasing decisions in fashion." This influence is most apparent in the success of ultra-fast fashion brands like Shein and Fashion Nova, which capitalize on viral trends and the desire for immediacy. This led me to think about how fast fashion has impacted the longevity of clothes in society. As noted by Priedel (2024), "Ultra-fast fashion encourages the purchase and wearing of cheap clothes...

only to discard them after a few wears," highlighting the role of social platforms in driving overconsumption. But how does this impact businesses? For businesses, understanding and leveraging social media is vital to remaining competitive in the market. "Exploring how social media is impacting business and noting its significance is crucial for a company to stay at the forefront of competition." (McCarthy, 2013) By integrating social media platforms into their strategies, brands can target specific demographics, increase engagement, and convert trends into sales. This allows them to reach a diverse global audience at their fingertips.

For example, the visual nature of Pinterest and Instagram allows businesses to connect directly with consumers, often providing links to purchase items with just one click. This not only allows them to reach their target audience, but also to be present in spaces that people scroll on for entertainment. In this rapidly evolving landscape, social media has redefined the relationship between fashion brands and consumers. While this offers exciting opportunities, it also raises concerns about sustainability and over consumption. However, by balancing these factors, businesses can harness social media's power while addressing the challenges it presents.



FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

In order to dive deeper into this topic, I conducted a focus group of 18-25 year olds at the University of Mississippi. The focus group provided valuable insights into how social media influences consumer behavior in the fast fashion industry. Participants revealed how platforms like TikTok and Instagram shape their purchasing habits, influence brand loyalty, and alter perceptions of quality. These findings emphasize the importance of businesses understanding the digital landscape in the rapidly growing and fast-paced fashion market.

FAST FASHION AND CONSUMER HABITS

Consumers often grapple with the trade-off between affordability and quality, a dilemma exacerbated by fast fashion's rise. In discussing this, one participant noted, "I prefer to own those things and buy them new 'cause I know I'm gonna wear them all the time," emphasizing the importance of perceived durability in purchasing decisions. However, impulsive buying behavior, driven by discounts and trends, can frequently lead to regret. Another participant admitted, "I definitely have bought things in the past just because it was a sale...then it comes back and it wasn't what I was expecting."

These habits highlight the need for businesses to balance trend responsiveness with sustainable practices to build long-term trust with consumers. If people are constantly changing their wardrobe, the trends will become unsustainable and over done. Consumers can feel overwhelmed with the constantly changing trends.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

One aspect of my initial research that the focus group confirmed was how social media's influence on consumer preferences cannot be underestimated. The focus group discussed that platforms like TikTok and Instagram are powerful tools for disseminating trends and shaping perceptions.

When asked about social media's presence in the marketing realm, one participant stated, "Social media has changed the way we are able to keep up with trends," demonstrating the speed at which digital platforms drive consumer engagement. Moreover, another participant shared, "If I see multiple people posting it on TikTok, I'm constantly seeing it versus like a billboard that I might not remember two seconds later," which underscores the repetitive and immersive nature of social media marketing. For brands, this highlights the importance of leveraging user-generated content and influencer partnerships to create authentic connections.



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BRAND LOYALTY AND PERCEPTION

While social media helps brands gain visibility, it also challenges their ability to build loyalty. When asked about this topic, participants expressed mixed feelings about visible logos and branding. One participant shared, “I don’t like big logos; I’d rather buy something for quality than to show off a brand.” However, the trustworthiness of influencers and peers often has a more significant impact. A participant noted, “I don’t trust sponsored posts because influencers are getting paid, but I trust someone on campus wearing something I can see in real life,” this highlights the importance of authentic, localized marketing strategies.

It also showcases how the younger generations value authenticity over sponsored content. Social media has further empowered Gen Z to hold brands accountable, not just for product quality but also for their values and actions. Participants noted that they would reconsider their loyalty to a brand if it engaged in practices they found objectionable, such as poor treatment of workers or environmental harm. For brands, this highlights the importance of cultivating an authentic presence both online and offline. Building loyalty among social media requires more than just trendy products—it demands transparency, ethical practices, and relatable messaging.

Social media campaigns should focus on storytelling, user-generated content, and partnerships with micro-influencers who genuinely align with the brand’s values. By fostering these authentic connections, brands can earn the trust and loyalty of a generation that values purpose and substance over style alone. Overall, these findings demonstrate that while social media drives fast fashion trends and purchases, consumers are increasingly aware of quality, authenticity, and sustainability. Brands that align their digital strategies with these values will be better positioned to foster long-term loyalty and success in an ever-changing market.



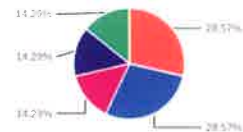
SURVEY FINDINGS

A survey was conducted of 18-25 year old students at the University of Mississippi. The survey data provided insights into the role of social media in shaping consumer behavior and preferences in the fashion industry. Three key areas were explored: differences in social media strategies for trendy vs. luxury fashion brands, the influence of social media influencers on purchasing decisions, and the preferred platforms for following fashion content.

SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR FASHION BRANDS

In a survey polling social media and fashion trends, respondents highlighted distinct approaches employed by trendy and luxury fashion brands. A significant proportion (28.57%) identified that trendy brands prioritize frequent, fast-paced posts showcasing new arrivals. In contrast, luxury brands were noted for their emphasis on exclusivity and storytelling (also 28.57%). Another notable trend was the heavy reliance of trendy brands on influencer partnerships to promote products (14.29%), compared to luxury brands' focus on limited releases to maintain brand prestige (28.57%). These findings suggest that trendy brands thrive on immediacy and influencer-driven visibility, while luxury brands leverage exclusivity and high production value to reinforce their market positioning.

How do you think social media marketing strategies used by "trendy" fashion brands differ from those used by luxury fashion brands? (Select all t...

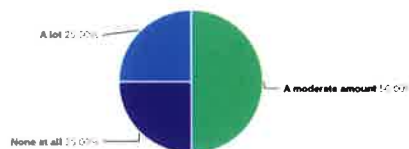


- Trendy brands focus on frequent, fast-paced posts showcasing new arrivals
- Luxury brands emphasize exclusivity and storytelling in their content
- Trendy brands rely heavily on influencer partnerships to promote products
- Luxury brands prioritize brand heritage and high production value in their campaigns
- Luxury brands focus on limited releases and exclusivity to maintain brand prestige

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

When asked about the extent of social media influencers' impact on purchasing decisions, half of the respondents (50%) reported a moderate influence. Interestingly, the remaining responses were split evenly, with 25% stating influencers have a significant impact and 25% saying they have no influence at all. This indicates that while influencers are pivotal for a portion of the audience, there remains a segment that remains relatively unaffected, possibly due to other factors like brand loyalty or personal shopping habits.

How much influence do social media influencers have on your fashion purchasing decisions?





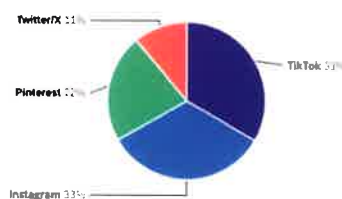
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PREFERRED PLATFORMS FOR FASHION CONTENT

From the survey results, Instagram and TikTok emerged as the most popular platforms for following fashion-related content, each capturing 33% of responses. Pinterest followed with 22%, and Twitter had the least engagement at 11%. The dominance of Instagram and TikTok underscores the importance of visually-driven and short-form content in engaging fashion audiences. This demonstrates the importance of brands having an online presence and how short videos can effect fashion trends. These platforms' user-friendly formats and high engagement rates make them ideal for showcasing fashion trends and influencer collaborations. Demonstrating a collaboration with influencer marketing.

Which social media platforms do you use to follow fashion content? (Select all that apply) 7



IMPLICATIONS FOR FASHION BRANDS

Overall, the survey findings emphasize the need for brands to tailor their social media strategies based on their positioning. Trendy brands should continue leveraging fast-paced content and influencer partnerships to maintain visibility and relevance. Conversely, luxury brands can benefit from enhancing their storytelling and exclusivity while strategically engaging on high-visibility platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, with a significant portion of consumers influenced by social media, influencer partnerships remain an essential tactic for brands aiming to sway purchasing decisions. By understanding and addressing these dynamics, fashion brands can refine their digital strategies to better connect with their target audiences and foster brand loyalty in a competitive market. It can also give brands a competitive advantage in the growing influencer marketing digital age.



For fashion brands looking to thrive in this digital age, it's crucial to understand the shifting dynamics of consumer behavior. To stay ahead of the curve, prioritize building authentic relationships with your audience through social media. Focus on creating high-quality, sustainable products that resonate with your customers' values, and partner with influencers who genuinely align with your brand. Embrace transparency in your practices and adapt your marketing strategies to foster long-term loyalty. Now is the time to evolve beyond fast fashion and lead the charge toward a more conscious, connected, and sustainable fashion future.

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND FAST FASHION

In conclusion, the findings from the focus group and survey provided critical insights into how social media shapes consumer behavior and brand perceptions in the fast fashion industry. Consumers, particularly Generation Z, are heavily influenced by digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram, which rapidly spread trends and drive impulse purchasing. Social media's ability to shape real-time fashion trends has led to an increased focus on quick, affordable fashion choices. However, this has created a paradox of fast consumption and the constant desire for newness, often resulting in buyer's remorse when the thrill of a purchase fades.

This has also led to a normalization of over consumption and increasingly unsustainable fashion practices. The role of authenticity in brand loyalty has become more pronounced, with consumers prioritizing quality over conspicuous branding. Social media influencers play a key role, but their influence is most effective when they align with the consumer's values and personal style. The findings indicate that while social media is a powerful tool for brands, it also requires careful navigation. Brands that leverage authenticity, transparency, and sustainable practices are more likely to cultivate lasting loyalty from the increasingly discerning

consumer base. Ultimately, these insights underscore the growing complexity of the fast fashion market. Brands must adapt to the rapidly evolving landscape of social media while addressing consumers' desire for both trendiness and ethical consumption. Moving forward, businesses in the fashion industry will need to balance the fast-paced nature of digital trends with long-term strategies focused on quality, sustainability, and genuine connections with their audience. Social media has played an integral part in the fashion marketing economy and will continue to be a staple in trends and ads for the years to come.

INFLUENCERS *and* IMC