

The Impact of Social Media on Fashion Trends and Trend Forecasting

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Abstract

Fashion trends and trend forecasting have evolved significantly with the rise of social media and innovative technologies. Trend cycles have drastically shortened, leading to more frequent appearances of different styles from different decades and making trends much harder to predict. This study looks at the evolution of trend cycles and trend forecasting concepts and how these dynamics have changed in the era of social media. Through a survey-based study, two hypotheses were tested: 1) Increased social media presence has increased the rate of the trend cycle; 2) Social media advertising and influencer marketing are the primary sources of fashion inspiration today. The survey was completed by a total of 139 respondents aged 17 to 72. The results supported both hypotheses. New trends are observed multiple times a month, and influencers on platforms like Instagram and TikTok play a pivotal role in shaping fashion choices. Furthermore, age and gender correlations were analyzed, identifying differences in platform usage and sources of fashion inspiration among different age and gender groups. These insights offer effective marketing strategies for fashion brands with a target audience. Understanding these changes in fashion and consumer behavior can help fashion businesses effectively predict and advertise trends.

Introduction

Fashion is defined as a popular way of dressing during a particular time or among a particular group of people (“Fashion,” [Encyclopedia Britannica]). A trend is something that is currently popular or fashionable (“Trend,” [Encyclopedia Britannica]). Trend forecasting follows traditional models, theories, and patterns to predict future fashion trends. These models have continued to develop and advance over time with further research. They are also constantly changing and being refined in light of societal changes. Where trends were originally understood to follow a 20-year cycle before reappearance (Mollard, 2022), innovative technologies and social media have drastically shortened the life cycles of trends today. The 20-year cycle remains true to an extent and can still serve as a framework for some trend predictions, but styles from every decade make appearances at seemingly random moments, and a

multitude of styles can be popular at the same time. Design and merchandising technologies have greatly reduced the speed to market, and social media makes it so trends rise and fall overnight. These trend cycles typically follow five stages: introduction, rise in popularity, peak of popularity, decline, and obsolescence. At the beginning of the cycle are the fashion innovators who are unique, fashion-forward, individualistic, and who like to introduce new styles. At the decline of the cycle are the fashion followers who hop onto a trend once it has become widely accepted by the mass. The fashion followers like to conform to styles that are safely accepted by others. Cycles continue to follow these stages, but the length and speed of trend cycles are different across fashion products and consumer markets.

While trend cycles have seemingly changed, so has our source of fashion inspiration. A

1930 social psychology publication states that fashion is evenly based on individuality and conformity. People turn to magazines like Vogue for fashion inspiration because styles advertised in magazines and fashion shows are special and striking. This provides a feeling of individuality while also being generally supported by the prestige of the publication and knowing others are striving for the same thing (Young, 1930). While this balance between the desire for social solidarity, and the desire for distinction remains true, the source of this inspiration has shifted. Given technological advances and the continuous increase in social media usage, influencers readily appear on for-you pages advertising new fashions without the viewer even having to seek it out. According to the Cotton Incorporated 2022 *Lifestyle Monitor*TM Survey, 33% of women and 26% of men cited social media as their source of fashion inspiration (Salfino, 2022). This statistic increases to 50% among consumers

aged 13-24 years old and remains high at 40% among 25-34, indicating a shift in younger generations and a changing future for fashion. It seems that with social media usage ever on the climb, social media and social media influencing will continue to become a greater source of fashion inspiration and dictator of what is trending.

Literature Review

History of Trend Cycles:

Product life cycles are commonly used to analyze market phenomena and consumer choice processes. In 1928, Paul Nystrom theorized that a fashion style and the frequency of its acceptance among the public was key to understanding fashion's cyclical behavior. He suggested that fashion could be quantitatively documented by counting populations of people wearing a particular style. Using frequency distribution, he depicted graphically the

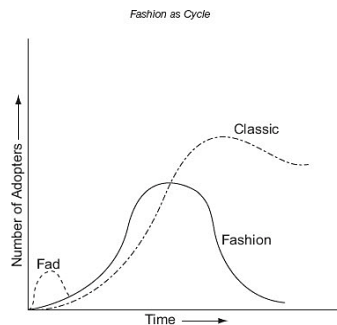
relationship of time to the changing level of consumer acceptance for varying styles. The data curve almost always took on a bell-shaped form. This data model has become widely accepted as the representation of a traditional fashion life cycle which consists of five stages: introduction, rise, peak, decline, and obsolescence. The slope height and steepness can vary based on the rate of acceptance and peak popularity of a trend, but it always follows this shape which has a beginning, middle, and end.

This model was traditionally believed to follow a 20-year cycle (Pillai, 2021), meaning that every 20 years or so the trends that were once popular will begin to be on the forefront again. The reason it cycles every 20 years is because every two decades a new generation of young adults appears who are still defining their styles. Young adults are experimenting in all aspects of life. When it comes to fashion, they are

looking for styles that feel new and different, leaving this age group to be heavily composed of fashion innovators and placing them at the beginning of the fashion cycle. When looking for fashion inspiration, it is common to look at what's been done in the past. 10 years is too recent, where a trend still feels too common or familiar, and 30 years seems too distant and dated, making 20 the sweet spot for reintroduction where trends feel unique and different yet trendy.

The 20-year cycle is still observed, as low-rise jeans, velour tracksuits, and the whole Y2k theme made its comeback in 2020, but simultaneously, styles from all different decades started popping up with the rise of TikTok in 2020 during Covid-19. An article from 2015 states that the life cycle of a trend can now vary (Goncu-Berk, 2015). It can become a fad, which is a short-lived trend that fades quickly, or a classic, which has lasting significance.

Sproles and Burns (1994) demonstrated this, by adding a fad and classic illustration to Nystrom's fashion life cycle model to display cyclical duration variations.



Fashion Life Cycles (Sproles and Burns, 1994)

There are also terms like "megatrends," which are large-scale changes affecting multiple industries, and "microtrends," which are subtle trends triggered by a small group of people. With social media usage ever on the rise, there is now an endless speed and desire for constant newness. Trend Forecaster, Geraldine Wharry, defines this as the "hypercycle", and places this responsible for the emergence of microtrends. Before social media, microtrends used to take 1-2 years to be

adopted (Poncelin, 2022) and would then stick around for 3-5 years (Hetantyo, 2023). Even a few years ago, these trends would still last a year or two, but now they can be cycled in months to weeks. Ultra-fast fashion no longer pays attention to runways, but rather what's going on on Instagram and TikTok. These brands select styles from social media and then produce dupe designs and products at rapid speed. Brands like ASOS, Shein, and Pretty Little Thing are introducing thousands of new items per day. The way social media has amplified and accelerated the spread of viral trends has made it hard for brands to anticipate the lifecycle of a product.

The Evolution of Trend Forecasting

Concepts:

Understanding trends is crucial for various disciplines and industries, as they reflect changes in society and can have a significant impact on consumer behavior and market

dynamics. A study conducted from 1844-1919 observed fashion cycles and changes in trends (Young, 1930). The takeaway from this study was that we can predict a general direction of trends but not an absolute direction or quantity. Newer research begs to challenge these conclusions. In 1968, an article by William Reynolds argues that there are many key factors to consider that aid in trend prediction. These include functionality, long-term trends, past fashion cycles, concurrent trends in other industries, self-limiting factors, the shape of the trend curve, insights from sociologists and anthropologists, and inside information. Fashion trends can be detected by analyzing advertising and observing an increase in trend-related publications. Fashion is also public; For a trend to become popular, it needs support from multiple designers. It is argued here that fashion trends follow a horizontal or vertical model, with most

trends exhibiting elements of both. Horizontal trends gradually gain popularity without significant changes, while vertical trends remain restricted to a specific group but progress in a specific direction. The mini skirt is an example of this as it progressively became more popular while concurrently becoming shorter. Knowing this helps in detecting trends and predicting their lifespan. Trends typically evolve within the boundaries of existing fashion, rather than introducing completely unfamiliar styles. When a trend becomes excessively narrow, or excessively widespread, it tends to fade away. The one major challenge still seen in this article is predicting how extreme a fashion must become before abandonment. For example, given social mores and the history of skirts, one would have thought mid-thigh would be the point at which shorter skirts stopped, but mini-skirts progressed. You can guess fairly accurately when looking at excess technologically or

functionally, but placing confidence in excess that is visual or aesthetic is tricky.

Research published in 2012 argues that perhaps it doesn't depend on how extreme a fashion becomes for it to be abandoned; that there are other reasons a trend fizzles out (Acerbi, 2012). Traditionally there are two models of fashion and cultural change: the status model and the neutral model. The "status model" suggests that fashion arises when low-status individuals copy high-status individuals. However, once a trend becomes popular, high-status individuals abandon it to differentiate themselves, causing low-status individuals to also abandon the trend. The "neutral model" proposes that fashion is a by-product of individuals randomly copying each other's preferences and traits. Acerbi argues that there is an alternative model called the "preference model" that combines the

cultural transmission of traits and preferences.

In this model, preferences for cultural traits are considered regulatory traits that influence the adoption and abandonment of traits. A study was conducted on the coevolution of one cultural trait and the preference for that trait, as well as the coevolution of multiple trait-preference pairs. The results showed that the preference model can generate fashion cycles, where a trait becomes popular and then disappears from the population. The dynamics of the model resemble empirical findings, such as the power-law distribution of cultural variants and the correlation between the rates of increase and decrease in popularity of cultural traits. These findings lead to a proposal of four phases of the fashion cycle: the emergence of a preference, the spread of the trait, the decline of the preference, and the eventual disappearance of the trait. The

dynamics of the cycle depend on the initial frequency of that preference. It was concluded that the neutral and status-based models cannot account for the breadth of empirical data as effectively as the preference model, but this model was never widely accepted. The status and neutral model, as well as the 5-stage cycle, are still highly regarded.

Goncu-Berk's 2015 study builds off these models, proposing four theories to explain trend evolution. The trickle-down theory suggests that trends originate in the upper classes and are imitated by lower classes. The trickle-across theory claims that trends diffuse horizontally among similar social groups. The bubble-up theory states that trends emerge in lower-status groups and are adopted by higher-status groups. Subculture leadership theory suggests that trends move from subcultures to the mainstream. Various models and frameworks have been proposed to analyze and predict trends. These include

the diffusion of innovations theory, which describes how innovations spread through different adopter categories; the fashion cycle model, involving the five stages of introduction, growth, maturity, and decline; and the diamond-shaped trend model, which categorizes adopters into different groups.

The diffusion of innovations theory is particularly interesting, as it connects socioeconomic and personality characteristics to adopter categories. Early adopters, at the beginning of the fashion cycle, are observed to be functioning at a higher social level, more literate, and upwardly mobile economically. This is reflective of the trickle-down theory. They are also found to be intellectually brighter, more open to change, more rational, and able to deal with abstract concepts more effectively than later adopters. (Rogers, 2003). It is suggested that the adoption of a fashion trend largely has to do with status-seeking, and early adopters having

higher social aspirations. While all of these theories have their differences, imitation from within a social system remains at the root of fashion change. Focusing on adoption rate can be used to group people into different categories for more effective trend prediction.

Most recently, a company Heuritech has taken notice of social media's influence on trend prediction and created a website using artificial intelligence for trend forecasting.

Their machine-learning system utilizes social media to analyze millions of images and unveil up-and-coming fashion trends. Like the diamond-shaped trend model and the diffusion of innovations theory, consumers are divided into categories to enhance trend prediction. The data collected from Instagram first segments consumers into three main panels, edgy, trendy, and mainstream. The three panels are based on tens of thousands of public accounts which are either hand-picked or AI-built from

Instagram and contain approximately 50K Instagram accounts from all over Europe, Brazil, Japan, and the US, as well as 400K Weibo accounts from China. These panels are regularly updated so as not to incorporate data from inactive or irrelevant accounts. AI image recognition is then used to identify over 3000 details from one image and cross-reference that data with consumer segments, geography, and seasonality to identify early-stage and niche trends.

So how exactly has social media altered fashion trends and trend cycles? Which of these models are most prevalent today, and how can we use this information for future trend prediction? While it has added many new factors to trend prediction such as global reach, an increase in trends at a certain time, and shortened trend cycles, perhaps if utilized correctly, social media can make trend predictions more accurate.

Hypotheses for Present Study

There were two main theories I wanted to test with my research. First, the effects social media has on the trend cycle. I hypothesized that the increase in social media presence has also increased the rate of the trend cycle so that instead of trends sticking around for 3-5 years, they are sticking around for only months to weeks. Secondly, I wanted to identify how the sources of fashion inspiration have shifted. I predicted influencers and social media advertising would be the main source of fashion inspiration today.

Method

To test my hypotheses, I created an eight-question survey and distributed it on LinkedIn and Instagram. This survey was distributed for voluntary participation. I kept the survey open for two weeks and received 139 responses. Prior to the main section of the survey, three demographic questions

were asked: age, gender, and ethnicity. The first of the eight questions in the main section of the survey mimicked a 2022 GWI study identifying the top motivation for social media use. The purpose of this question was to confirm or deny those findings and identify whether there has been a shift in motivation for social media usage. The second question asked respondents which platforms they use to identify the general popularity rankings of platforms. The third question was asking respondents how often they use social media for fashion inspiration and what platform they use most for fashion. This would tell me whether the platforms used for fashion follow the general popularity rankings, or whether there are certain platforms more commonly used for fashion. Question four asked what or who most inspires your fashion choices. This question confirms or denies my hypothesis that influencers and social media advertising are the current main source of

fashion inspiration. Question five asked how often the respondent sees a new fashion trend on social media, which correlates to my other hypothesis that the trend cycle has shortened.

The last two questions asked how often respondents purchase an item or trending item off social media. A study conducted in 2014 determined that social media influenced pre-purchase behavior, but when it came to actually buying a product through social media, engagement was much lower (Gul, 2014). I wanted to test whether that was still true, however, I was less concerned about the source the consumer purchased from. Whether or not a consumer purchased an item directly from social media does not reflect the influence social media had on making a purchase. People may want to price check or find a different color, so they stray away from the original source of exposure, but social media would still be the

primary influence on the purchase. Research on “electronic word of mouth” highlighted the prevalence of information seeking and sharing amongst fashion consumers on social media (Wolny, 2013). Utilizing platforms to gather information about fashion products, trends, and brands, enabled consumers to make informed purchase decisions. By sharing experiences, recommendations, and opinions, consumers contributed to the collective knowledge of the fashion community. So these final two questions in my survey were meant to gather if, and how often, exposure to a product from social media was influencing a purchase.

Results

Of 139 respondents, 2.9% were under 18, 38.1% were between the ages of 19-24, 9.3% were 25-35, 9.3% were 36 to 49, 26.7% were 50-59, and 13.7% were 60 and above. 86 respondents were female (61.9%),

52 were male (37.4%), and one was non-binary/ third gender (0.7%). When it came to ethnicity, 87.8% of respondents were Caucasian, 7.9% Asian, 2.9% Hispanic, 0.7% African American, and 0.7% were American Indian or Alaskan Native.

According to the 2022 study by GWI, the top motivation for social media use is to keep in touch with friends and family, but other popular reasons included inspiration for things to do and buy (27.7% of respondents), finding products to purchase (26.3%), and seeing content from favorite brands (23.1%). My results confirmed that keeping in touch with family and friends is the top reason for using social media, with 56.8% of respondents (Figure 1). However, the other popular reasons were not so popular amongst my survey sample. Only 3.6% responded with “inspiration for things to do or buy”, 1.4% said “viewing content from favorite brands or creators”, and 0 respondents listed “finding products to

purchase” as their top motivation for using social media. Sharing photos and videos (12.9%) and finding funny or entertaining content (12.2%) were the second most popular reasons, so it seems that social media is still primarily used for communication and entertainment rather than consumerism. That does not mean, however, that social media’s influence on product purchasing is not still on the rise, it just has not exceeded the traditional motivations for social media usage.

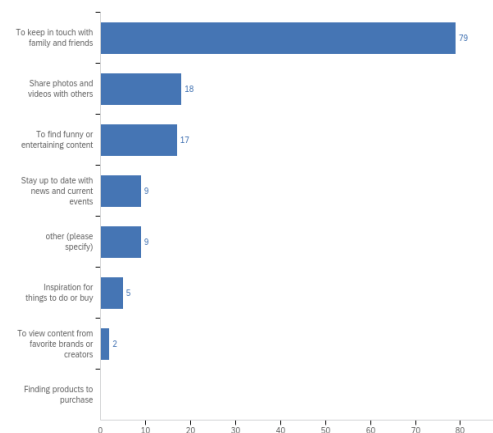


Figure 1. Ranking of motivations for social media use

When I asked respondents how often they purchased an item they saw on social media, the majority (38.1%) said occasionally (Figure 2). The same happened when I asked how often they purchased a trending item off social media, with the majority (30.9%) responding occasionally (Figure 3). This confirms that social media does have an impact on product purchases and consumer behavior. Compared to going in-person to stores, or browsing through websites to find products, people are now also buying items they were primarily exposed to through social media. It may not be frequently yet, but even occasionally puts social media on the map for a shift in consumer behavior. The majority of respondents also indicated that they used social media for fashion inspiration daily (23.7%) or weekly (23.7%) further supporting this constant need for newness and drive to keep up with new trends on the market (Figure 4).

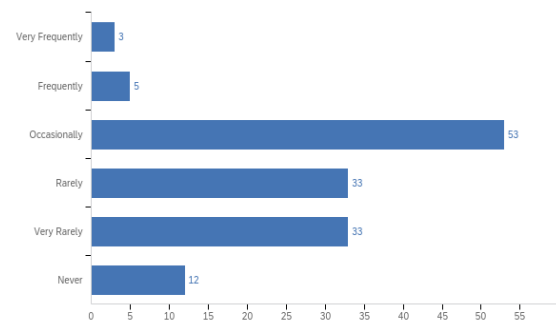


Figure 2. Frequency of purchases from social media exposure

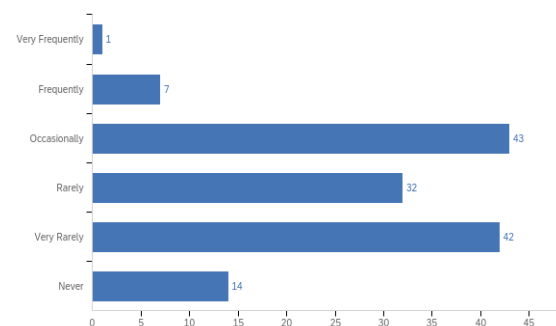


Figure 3. Frequency of purchasing items that are trending on social media

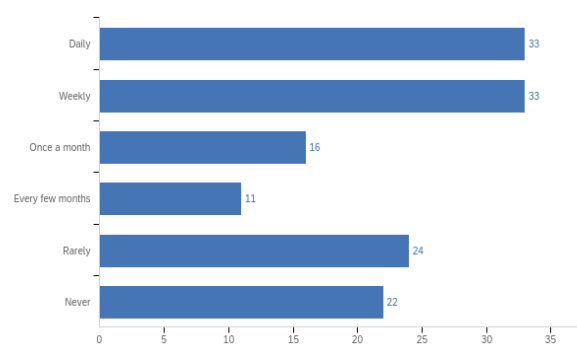


Figure 4. Frequency of social media use for fashion inspiration

Of social media platforms, Instagram was the most popular (24.3%), followed by Facebook (21.6%), then Snapchat (16.4%), then TikTok (15.1%) (Figure 5). When asked what platform respondents used most for fashion inspiration, Instagram remained the highest (33.09%), followed by Tiktok (19.4%) (Figure 6). These results mirrored results from a survey by Cotton Incorporated Lifestyle Monitor, where Instagram was the most popular platform for fashion ideas (73%), followed by Tiktok (52%). Interestingly, zero respondents listed Snapchat as their source for fashion inspiration, and Facebook was much lower as well. This shows that there are certain platforms that are more popular for fashion and exposure to products, therefore platforms like Instagram and Tiktok may be more useful for trend influencing and trend prediction.

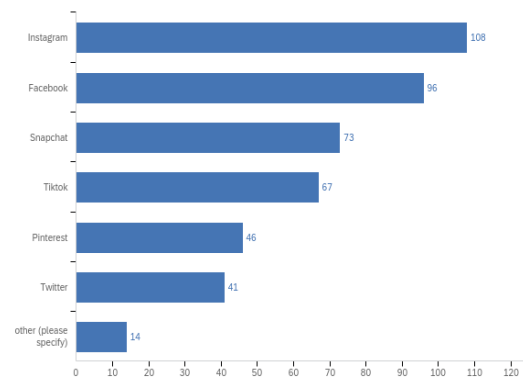


Figure 5. The popularity of social media platforms

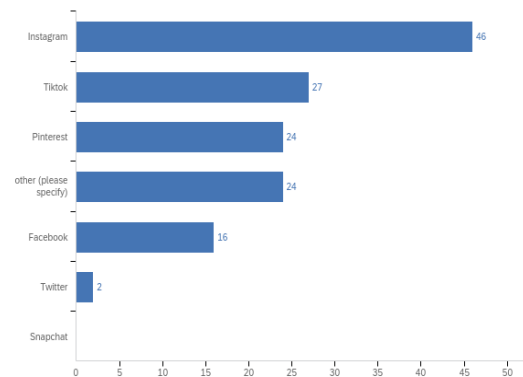


Figure 6. Popularity of social media platforms for fashion inspiration

When asked “What/who most inspires your fashion choices?” The top answers were brand advertising (28.8%) and influencers (28.1%) (Figure 7). This supports my hypothesis. While influencers weren’t number one, they ran a close second to brand advertising; this encompasses

advertising and brand promotion on social media, which I also hypothesized would be a top inspiration for fashion choices. This is a major contrast from past, traditional understandings of how trends form and spread. In 1930, magazines were understood to be a main source of trend expansion. Then in 2012, it was offered that higher-class individuals were the source being followed based on the status model. 2015 continues with this idea (the trickle down theory) but also suggests the trickle across theory, which places friends, acquaintances, and similar groups responsible for trend diffusion. My findings do not strictly follow any of these models. Only 5 respondents (3.6%) selected magazines as their source of fashion inspiration. Celebrities, which I would classify as higher-class individuals, made up 10.1% of responses, and friends made up 16.5%.

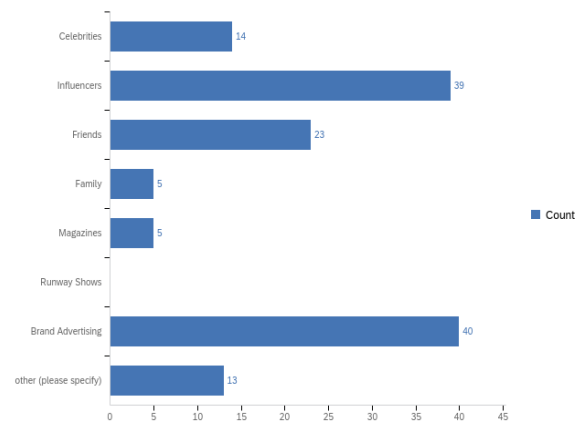


Figure 7. Rankings of sources of fashion inspiration

My second hypothesis, that the trend cycle has shortened due to social media, was also supported. When asked “How often do you see a new fashion trend appear on social media”, 29.5% of respondents said 1-3 times a month, followed by 21.6% who said weekly, and 15.8% who said daily (Figure 8). This confirms that the “hypercycle” is very much in action. Instead of the “20-year rule”, or the typical diffusion of microtrends every 1-2 years, there are now new styles popping up multiple times a month.

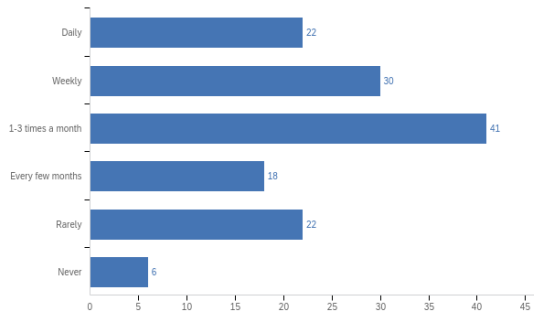


Figure 8. Frequency of respondents noticing a new trend appearing on social media

Age and Gender Correlations:

On certain questions, there were noticeable variations in responses between age groups. For one, nearly every respondent up to age 35 used both Instagram and Snapchat. In fact, every female respondent to age 35 used Instagram, and all but a couple to age 24 also had both Snapchat and Tiktok. For males up to age 35, 95% used Snapchat, and 95% used Instagram. Tiktok was less popular among men. As the age groups got higher, Instagram usage remained high, but Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter became much more prevalent. Pinterest was much more popular among women, with 41

respondents reporting they used it, compared to only 4 men. Interestingly, where Tiktok usage was high for women up to age 24, there is a lull in responses from age 25-49. Only one respondent in that age group reported using Tiktok, but it becomes popular again in the 50-59 age group. For females, Instagram, Tiktok, and Pinterest were the most popular platforms specifically for fashion inspiration, and for males, it was Instagram and Facebook.

Another interesting question to look at was “What/Who most inspires your fashion choices”. Most popular for women was influencers (53.8%), followed by friends (17.3%), whereas most popular for men was brand advertising (42.3%) followed by friends (17.3%) (Figure 9, Figure 10). The top response for men was 4th most popular among women and the top response for women was 3rd most popular among men. When looking at the differentiation between

age groups within female responses, you can see the heavy impact of influencers to age 24, then responses balance out evenly with brand advertising and celebrities at age 25-35. Brand advertising then becomes most popular for 36 and up, and friends have an interestingly strong influence on the 50-59 age group. Among men aged 19-24, friends have the strongest influence on fashion choices. Brand advertising is strongest for ages 25 and up. Family was an overall unpopular response, but it was noticeably more common among men than women, specifically men ages 50+. Perhaps these are men who have their spouses or children styling them.

Fashion Inspiration (Female)

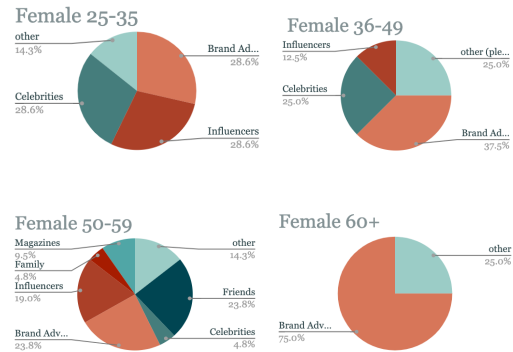
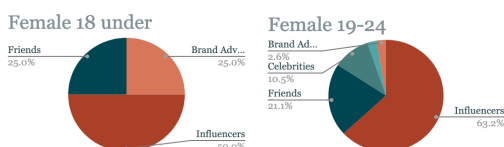
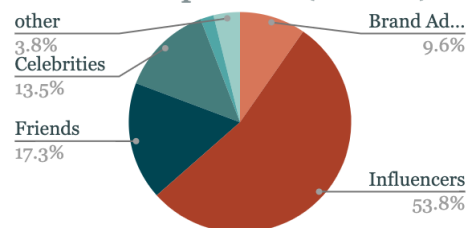


Figure 9. Female respondents' inspiration for fashion choices based on age

Fashion Inspiration (Male)

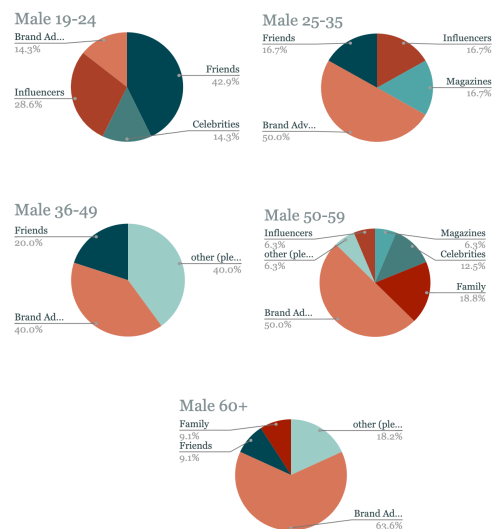
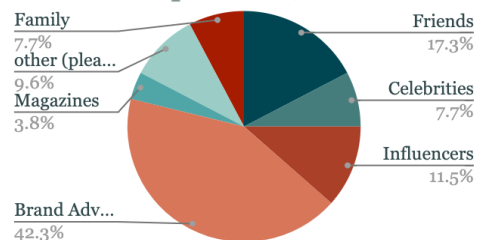


Figure 10. Male respondents' inspiration for fashion choices based on age

Discussion

Advancement of media has led to many changing influences in the fashion world. The global reach of social media allows information to reach farther and spread faster. The increased speed of content creation generates a drive for constant newness, as seen with the hypercycle, where companies are pumping out new styles and designs by the day. Given that trend cycles have shortened, social media analysis should be frequently, even constantly, done by fashion companies to keep up with the ongoing shifts and developments in trends. Social media has also changed our sources of fashion inspiration. Results indicated that influencers and brand advertising are the most common sources of fashion inspiration, which are both mainly seen on social media. Influencers add a new aspect to trend theory because they do not fall into a specific category like upper class or lower class. Some influencers are fairly well known and

could take on the label of a celebrity, but many fashion influencers are just normal people that have gained a significant following but are not highly known. This creates a new category that is a mix between the status and neutral model and trickle-down/trickle-across theories. Perhaps now, like the Vogue magazine example where unique styles are reinforced by the prestige of the magazine, styles promoted by influencers are reinforced through likes. A higher like count on a video or advertisement indicates desire and support of others. So when a viewer sees a new style on their feed that is backed by a high like count, they are gaining that feeling of individuality and conformity that makes a trend take off. Because it is through social media that people most popularly gain fashion inspiration, it is here that fashion trends will commonly spread and take off. This makes social media key for predicting

and searching for upcoming trends as well as advertising and marketing trends.

The difference in popularity between men and women, men most commonly finding inspiration from brand advertising and women from influencers, should also be noted. Depending on the product or company, this is important for marketing and advertising efforts. Perhaps a company with a women's target audience like Free People should focus heavier on influencer advertising, while a menswear brand like Bonobos, should focus more on brand advertising. The difference in platform popularity between men and women should also be taken into account by fashion marketing and advertising teams. Because preferences differ based on age and gender, this can help build a framework for marketers of brands that have certain target audiences. In general, Instagram is the most popularly used platform for fashion

inspiration and should be utilized the most for product promotion, but brands with a women's focus should also heavily utilize Tiktok and Pinterest, and brands with a young adult target audience should advertise largely on Tiktok. Focusing on the platform most popularly used by your brand's target audience is also important for trend prediction. If your target audience is young adults, you most likely will not want to look at what is going on on Facebook, but rather on Tiktok.

Limitations

The biggest limitation of our findings was that the survey was distributed by convenience sampling. Because it only reached a limited network, the results are not as representative as results from random sampling would have been. For example, 122 respondents were Caucasian, 11 Asian, 4 Hispanic, 1 African American, and 1 American Indian. Our sample size was also

relatively small, and women made up nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of responses with $\frac{1}{2}$ of those respondents being under 25. Therefore, responses could have been less variant due to those factors, such as sample size and age as well. However, despite the small sample size, it is clear that there are certainly variances in social media usage and platform popularity between age groups and genders. These limitation factors are the very reason I broke results down by age and gender. I figured influencers would have a greater effect on the younger crowd, and was curious whether they had begun to make an impact on other generations as well, which they certainly have. By breaking the results down by age and gender, we are able to account for some of the potential skews in the overall data and are able to identify how trend forecasting and marketing efforts vary across age and gender groups. Certain theories and models work better for certain groups.

Conclusion

The advances in technology and the prevalence of social media have changed the face of trend forecasting. For one, trend cycles have shortened due to the constant desire for newness and rapid spread of information through social media. To keep up with this rapid trend cycle and constantly new arising fashions, forecasters and marketers in the industry should pay closest attention to social media. Trend forecasting efforts should follow different models based on the age and gender of the target market. Being that the fashion choices of certain ages and certain genders are swayed by different sources (e.g. women under 25 mainly inspired by influencers) and platforms (e.g. respondents under 25 largely use TikTok), this can help build a marketing framework for brands who have a certain target audience. Social media is now the primary source of where trends are arising and spreading, therefore it is key for

discovering potential trends (rise) and
marketing and advertising trends (spread).

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