The Decline of Originality in the Fashion Industry: Overconsumption, Social Media, and Cultural Power

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Introduction:

In a social media-driven world, fashion has begun to lose its meaning, as trends on apps like Instagram and TikTok run rapidly. However, what happens when those trends cause clothing to devolve from a form of personal identity into just another disposable product? Better yet, what happens to creativity and individuality through the process? What was once known as a form of expression, an art, has now been diminished to a marketing tactic for money. As this discussion centers on fashion, more specifically fast fashion, the question that needs to be answered is: what is it? Fast fashion is the term used to describe a business model in the clothing industry that focuses on the mass production of inexpensive, trendy clothes in response to changing styles and trend cycles to meet consumer demand (Gomez et all., 2021). The clothes are often made with cheaper materials and sold at low prices, which helps retailers continually introduce new items aligned with current fashion trends, encouraging consumers to buy more. Some examples include popular clothing brands such as Zara, H&M, Shein, Forever 21, and Fashion Nova (Gomez et all., 2021). While the idea of cheap, affordable clothing may not sound bad, some factors make these brands and fast fashion as a whole controversial.

While affordability is a great benefit for most, the industry causes numerous environmental impacts. One of the biggest is the release of toxic chemicals from dyes and finishing processes into rivers and lakes, and another is the significant emissions that drive climate change (Gomez et al., 2021). The most common environmental impact that has more to do with people than companies themselves is disposable culture, which is consumers buying things designed only to be worn a few times and then being thrown away, leading to large amounts of landfill each year. One of the biggest synthetic fabrics, polyester, can take years to

decompose while also shedding microplastics into the environment when washed. Alongside this, there are negative impacts on workers. Examples of this include low wages, unsafe working conditions, exploitation, and factory disasters.

Originality is creating something new and unique that has not been seen before. It is about breaking away from trends and setting yourself apart with your own style. Overconsumption in fashion refers to excessive buying and discarding of clothing. Fast fashion is a business model that mass-produces trendy, inexpensive clothing to meet consumer demand. Ultimately, it creates a cycle that encourages people to buy more clothing, resulting in overconsumption. Fast-fashion items are typically not meant to last, which means the constant buying contributes to significant environmental waste. Social media contributes to both the decline of originality and the rise of overconsumption in fashion. Social media keeps the question of what is in demand, while influencers often showcase the latest trends to encourage consumers to buy them before they are no longer popular (Gabriel, 2018). The decline of originality in the fashion industry is driven by overconsumption rooted in capitalism and desire, reinforced by social media influence and cultural power structures that prioritize imitation and profit over creativity and craftsmanship.

Understanding Overconsumption:

Overconsumption is a root cause shaping the modern fashion industry and plays a vital role in its decline in originality. In the global fashion industry, overconsumption is the practice of purchasing clothing in quantities that exceed necessity. It is driven by desire, trend cycles, and constant exposure to new styles (Gomez et al., 2021). Instead of promoting items for long-term use and creative expression, the industry promotes “rapid turnover,” meaning clothing is worn only a few times before being thrown away (Gabriel, 2018). This causes a pattern, a cycle that's

normalized, adding to the idea of fast fashion as companies prioritize quantity and speed over originality and sustainability. Michelle Blair Gabriel, the author of "Desire, Power, and Capitalism: A Theoretical Exploration of Overconsumption in the Global Fashion Industry," argues that overconsumption is not merely a result of individual consumers but rather a structural feature of a capitalist system (Gabriel, 2018). In a fashion market that has become heavily saturated, brands continually attempt to head demands in order to make profits. Gabriel explains that desire is intentionally curated through advertising, branding, and social influence. Turning clothing into a status symbol and identity, compared to something functional (Gabriel, 2018). This desire fuels overconsumption by creating the illusion that personal relevance and social belonging depend on constant purchasing. Thus, originality is undermined as consumers are encouraged to follow trends rather than develop individual style.

There is a connection between overconsumption and waste, especially in fast fashion. Due to overconsumption, companies rely on mass production, leading to an oversupply of clothing that is rarely sold, worn, or even donated. This results in excess clothing often ending up in landfills, which then contributes to environmental degradation. Gabriel states that overconsumption is one of the root causes of the ongoing waste crisis, highlighting that the fashion industry's survival, in a way, depends on encouraging disposability. This all leads to clothing no longer being desired for its longevity or creativity, but rather for rapid replacement, which reinforces a cycle in which originality is sacrificed for profit and numbers.

Capitalism reshapes clothing from functional and cultural practices into endless cycles of desire and purchase, normalizing overconsumption. The logic of continual change works against originality and deep creativity, favoring rapid replacement over

lasting uniqueness. Consumers believe they have power and freedom to choose what to wear, but corporations shape and control fashion norms, creating the illusion of choice. Fashion operates on amplifying desire: the desire to express identity, to be liked, and to belong. This leads to desire, creating a feedback loop: the more people want newness, the more they buy; satisfaction does not last, and consumption continues. Consumers willingly give up real power to corporations in exchange for the expression of identity through branded goods.

Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the decline of originality in the fashion industry, it is necessary to examine the systems that shape how people think about clothing, trends, and, more importantly, value. Fashion itself does not exist; it is made up of influences from cultural narratives, power structures, and systems of meaning that shape what consumers view as marketable or "desirable" (Foucault, 1972). Two vital theoretical frameworks approach and explain how these systems work; these frameworks come from Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Foucault, who wrote "Discourse and Power," explains how industries and institutions shape what society considers fashionable or valuable. Barthes' "Semiology and the Rhetorical Codes of Fashion" explains how clothing functions as a system of signs that are used to communicate meaning through images, language, and media. When grouped, these frameworks reveal that fashion trends are not purely creative expressions but are shaped by cultural power structures and systems of communication that, in turn, influence overconsumption (Foucault, 1972).

Michel Foucault's theory of "Discourse and Power" offers insights into how ideas about fashion come to be accepted as truth. Foucault explains that systems of language,

ideas, and practices shape how people understand reality. “Discourses” are used to determine exactly what can be said, what is considered normal, and, ultimately, what is valued in our society. Foucault argues that truth does not exist independently; instead, truths are produced by social systems that shape knowledge and perception.

To Foucault, power is not something that’s held by governments or authorities; it exists within networks of institutions, media, and cultural norms. Power shapes knowledge by determining which voices are, in effect, more important and which perspectives are ignored. In the context of fashion, high fashion houses, advertising agencies, magazines, and social media platforms all help shape the discourse around trends and style.
This causes fashion to become a system that produces cultural “truths” about what clothing is desirable. When certain styles of clothing begin to repeatedly appear in fashion shows, advertisements, and influencer content, they become the norm and the current trend. This leads consumers to view these styles as objectively fashionable. For example, when luxury brands such as Chanel introduce a particular style or aesthetic, and it is widely circulated across social and fashion media, it becomes the new standard for modern style. Through this process, fashion discourse begins to encourage consumers to adopt specific styles while rejecting others. Items that align with popular trends are labeled fashionable, while those outside the discourse are seen as outdated or unfashionable. As a result, the fashion industry maintains influence over consumer preferences while also reinforcing a cycle of production and consumption. This system prioritizes profit, constant trend cycles, and turnover, which can contribute to a decline in brands' originality and creativity as they increasingly reproduce already popular styles.

While Foucault discusses how power shapes the discourse of fashion, Roland Barthes gives insight into how fashion communicates meaning. Barthes’ theory of semiology explains

how cultural objects function as signs that convey messages. In semiotics, a sign will consist of a signifier (the object itself) and the signified (the concept or label it is associated with). Clothing is therefore not only functional but symbolic. Barthes argues that fashion operates as a system of signs that communicates identity, status, and cultural values. A piece of clothing's meaning is determined not just by its material or design but also by the cultural messages attached to it. Meanings are constructed through advertising, fashion journalism, and visual imagery.

The media plays an important role in shaping these meanings. Fashion magazines, runway photography, and social media platforms present clothing within specific contexts that influence how audiences perceive it. Images of celebrities and influencers wearing certain styles of clothing create associations between the clothing itself and lifestyle or identities. Language also plays a role in these systems of meaning; fashion descriptions can sometimes frame clothing symbolically. Examples are words like ¨Timeless", "luxury" or "exclusive" which are words that reinforce the perception of value in certain items.

This system of signs is how fashion communicates cultural meanings and messages that, in turn, influence consumer behavior. When specific styles are consistently portrayed as desirable or prestigious, consumers begin to associate them with social status or even personal success. This results in fashion becoming less about individual creativity and more about participating in a shared system of cultural symbols and meanings. Brands replicate existing visual codes to produce items that quickly resonate with consumers, ultimately encouraging further imitation within the fashion industry.

Combining both Foucault's theory of Discourse and Power with Barthes' "Semiology and Rhetorical Codes of Fashion," understanding how the fashion industry shapes consumer behavior becomes clearer. Power structures influence which styles are promoted as fashionable, while

systems of signs give those styles significance and cultural meaning. Together, these frameworks can be used to examine what people buy, wear, and, more importantly, consider valuable.
In terms of modern fashion, social media platforms have amplified this process. Influencers, celebrities, and brand campaigns rapidly curate images of new styles to people worldwide. These images reinforce the discourse of trends while also attaching symbolic meanings to specific clothing items. As a result, consumers are constantly exposed to media that encourages them to choose a specific style to align with current cultural norms. Ultimately, examining fashion through theoretical frameworks reveals that fashion trends are not solely a result of creativity or personal taste. However, it is shaped by networks of power, communication, and cultural symbolism that influence how consumers perceive value and style.

Conceptualizing fashion

Roland Barthes' analysis of fashion as a structured system of signs further explains why originality proceeds to decline within fashion culture. In "The Language of Fashion", Barthes argues that clothing functions as a communicative system instead of a solely individual artistic expression, which asserts that fashion turns garments into actual meaning through both language and representation. Using his theoretical framework, "Semiology and the Rhetorical Codes of Fashion," readers can understand fashion as a network of signs in which Barthes claims "semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits." this quote explains how Barthes' semiology studies focuses on all forms of creations, analyzing any system of language, fashion, images, or behavior and defining them as a structured set of signs to communicate a specific meaning. The concept of the vestimentary code refers to the garment physically, while both the terminological and rhetorical codes emerge through discourse that can assign cultural meanings and value to clothing. In a capitalist consumer culture, or an

overconsumption culture, these codes and terms become the standard, as recognizable signs are not only easier to market but also easier to reproduce. Barthes explains that fashion writing does not merely describe clothing but produces meaning, thus turning garments into socially readable symbols. As a result, originality declines because designers and brands repeatedly rely on what is familiar to consumers and what guarantees consumer recognition and profit, rather than taking the risk of innovation or stepping outside the norm (Barthes, 1967; Barthes, 1983).

Barthes' discussion of rhetorical fashion codes further clarifies how social media reinforces imitation and overconsumption rather than creativity and originality. Barthes' "The Fashion System" examines how fashion meaning is generated through discourse, in which descriptions and images can construct desire by linking clothing to identity and social status. Fashion is then operating less on craftsmanship and more on communication; it encourages individuals to adopt already established meanings. Barthes notes that fashion language can also create a "rhetoric" that persuades consumers to buy by attaching symbolic narratives such as elegance or luxury to garments (Barthes, 1967; Barthes, 1983). Social media then intensifies and speeds up this process by circulating these codes, rewarding styles that are instantly recognizable and widely imitated. Influencers and brands function as cultural "intermediaries" who mass-reproduce dominant aesthetics aligned with capitalist profitability, which, in turn, reinforces power structures that favor privileged visuals over creativity. As fashion becomes increasingly dependent on digital repetition and on how the algorithm responds, originality is diminished and tainted, and success becomes heavily reliant on reproduction or on already established signs rather than on curating new forms of artistic expression (Barthes, 1967; Barthes, 1983).

Barthes' concept of fashion as a myth builds on his larger semiotic theory, and cultural meanings are encoded in everyday objects and practices. In his "Semiotics of Fashion," he argues that clothing is never merely functional; it operates as a sign system in which garments typically carry meaning beyond their physical forms. Fashion myths are stories and ideologies embedded in these signs, often communicated through magazines, advertisements, and social media imagery. As an example, a black leather jacket is not just a piece of clothing; it often signifies rebellion, toughness, or a counter to social norms (often seen worn by rebels in movies, TV shows, comics, etc.). Barthes claims that these signs are considered natural or obvious, presenting the social and economic structures that produce them. This fashion-as-myth process allows fashion to appear as trends, as though they were created naturally by cultural taste, but in reality, it's the opposite. It is through liberating decisions made by brands, designers, and media institutions (Barthes, 1967; Barthes, 1983). Fashion myths transform garments into symbols that convey feelings of desire, or moral and aesthetic value, amongst consumers. With this framework, originality is constrained in a way that clothing is constantly interpreted through pre-existing narratives or trends. Consumers are encouraged to participate in these myths by acquiring styles that signify status within a particular social group or alignment with a cultural ideal, rather than experimenting with new, personally meaningful designs. With modern fashion in particular, this process is amplified on social media, where influencers and viral trends circulate meaning.

An example of this is the viral "cottagecore" aesthetic on TikTok, which conveys nostalgia for many, romanticism for others, and an idealized lifestyle for still others. This is an example of turning simple garments into widely imitated symbols of identity. Barthes's semiotic approach examines how what may seem like personal expression is often just the reproduction of

socially constructed myths, turning originality into a difficult thing to excel at in a culture dominated by symbolic repetition.

In addition to fashion functioning as myth, Barthes analyzes fashion as a “top-down system,” defined as a structured hierarchy in which meaning and trends are determined by industry and cultural authorities rather than by spontaneous consumer choice. According to Barthes, designers, editors, and advertisers act as cultural intermediaries who turn clothing into socially constructed messages that circulate through fashion in magazines, runway shows, and, most notably, social media platforms. This Top-Down system establishes what is considered stylish, desirable, or even culturally valuable at any given time. Consumers participate in the system not only by falling prey to these signs but also by adopting the styles promoted by the people in authority who created them, thereby reinforcing the hierarchy through imitation. For instance, when high fashion brands introduce seasonal runway collections, the trends presented are often experimental.

However, they are mediated by media channels that translate these looks into not just something wearable but also marketable to mainstream consumers. Fast fashion brands then mass-produce these looks, completing the flow of influence from the Top-Down. Barthes emphasizes that this system is not neutral; it serves economic and cultural power structures by reinforcing social stratification. In an overconsumption-driven context, this hierarchy privileges profitability and recognizability over originality and craftsmanship, as styles that are readily desired by the public are more likely to be reproduced and sold. Social media further assists the Top-Down effect by providing real-time feedback on what trends truly resonate with consumers. Rewarding styles that achieve virality are what continue to be sold, while anything innovative or deemed unconventional is marginalized. Ultimately, fashion, as a top-down system, further

constrains creativity by channeling consumer behavior, dictating what is exactly desirable, and making deviation from established norms both socially and economically costly for some. Barthes' analysis shows that originality is no longer a matter of personal choice but is structurally limited by hierarchical mechanisms that dictate the production and interpretation of fashion.

Social Media & Fashion Consumption:

Social media has become a fundamental way people engage with fashion, reshaping not only what consumers buy but also why they buy it. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram serve as popular spaces where trends are created, circulated, and normalized. What makes social media so powerful in the fashion industry is its ability to fuse visibility with influence: looks are not just displayed; they are recommended, endorsed, and replicated by global audiences (Jovandić, 2021). Through algorithmic curation and influencer networks, social media accelerates trend cycles and heightens consumer exposure to new styles, which in turn fuels the desire to consume. This dynamic ultimately affects consumer behavior by connecting fashion directly to societal validation and personal identity.

One of the obvious mechanisms through which social media shapes fashion consumption is influencer culture. Influencers are individuals with large followings who create their own content styles, whether in lifestyle, makeup, fashion, or athletics. These kinds of people have cultivated a following through daily posts on Instagram, sponsored haul videos on TikTok and YouTube, which can signal which styles are desirable (Jovandić 2021).

The concept of imitation vs. inspiration in personal styles in contemporary fashion dives into how social media often encourages conformity, the illusion of personalization, and blurring the lines between individual expression and mass appeal. Influencers curate looks that are not

just visually compelling but also effective at using the algorithm to their advantage (Jovandić 2021). Meaning content that fits a particular or familiar aesthetic performs better and spreads more rapidly. Their curation, paired with a certain narrative, leads consumers to believe that adopting these styles is a way to express their own identity. With this, influencers operate as culture intermediaries; tastes are not invented by consumers themselves but are mediated by what social media hierarchies choose to elevate within certain aesthetics (Jovandić 2021).

Algorithm trend cycles can further intensify the process as social media platforms use engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and watch time. This is then used to determine what surfaces on a user's feed. This feedback loop helps push trend turnover as popular looks become worldwide before users can fully incorporate them into their personal wardrobes. The result is a cycle of rapid adoption and abandonment, in which aesthetics rise and fade just as quickly, reinforcing the idea that fashion is always "What is next? " What is better than what is enduring? It is this constant renewal that fuels overconsumption, as consumers subconsciously worry about keeping their clothes up to date to signal relevance. Influencers operating as intermediaries, presenting curated aesthetics that encourage conformity alongside trends, social endorsements, and the reinforcement of the algorithm, help foster overconsumption, which in turn leaves no room for genuine self-expression or originality amongst consumers and creators (Jovandić, 2021; Gabriel, 2018).

Conclusion

As the modern fashion industry has demonstrated, both structural and societal forces constrain originality and creativity, and fast-fashion business models, social media, and capitalist desires quickly fuel overconsumption. Prioritizing replication, imitation, and profit over personal expression, creativity, and craftsmanship (Gabriel 2018, Gomez et al, 2021). Foucault's discourse

theory highlights how institutions socially construct fashion norms, while Barthes' semiotics shows how clothing functions as a system of signs that communicates identity, status, and meaning (Foucault, 1972; Barthes, 1967, Barthes, 1983). Social media amplifies these processes by rewarding existing aesthetics rather than fostering new or creative ideas, which in turn leads to rapid adoption and disposal (Jovandić, 2021). Ultimately, originality in fashion has become constrained by structural pressures and industry narratives, suggesting that reclaiming personal creativity would require both critical consumer awareness and systemic change in the fashion industry.