

Instagram Influencers and their Complicated Relationship with Fast Fashion

Fashion has not always been as readily accessible as it is today, the once exclusive hobby for the rich and talented has now become an interest of many people across all market sectors. The trends set and enjoyed by these fashion leaders have now become highly accessible and affordable to obtain. This democratisation of fashion can be attributed to many factors including the rise of the internet blogger and in recent years, Instagram influencers and their ability to create branding so strong that they have become integral to the growth of designer and fast fashion brands alike. Social media influencers as described by Hearn and Schoenhoff in their research paper "Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' & the rise of Social Media Influencers" are people who work to "generate a form of 'celebrity' capital by cultivating as much attention as possible" this is done through their ability to cultivate "an authentic 'personal brand'" (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016). Social media sites such as Instagram have assisted in fostering these new fashion communities where the barriers to entry have been greatly reduced, now fashion and personal style have become intertwined into our identity and it is magnified through our presentation of self online. Aspirational brands appear more accessible as they are now being marketed toward a much larger audience and this directly coincides with the shift in aspirational people now being influencers and internet celebrities, opposed to traditional celebrities and stars. At what cost has this democratisation and expansion into pop culture had on the fashion industry and more importantly what repercussions will ensue as a result of this accelerated growth. This paper will explore the power of social capital on Instagram and its affects on the presentation of identity in the fashion community, which has led to influencers sacrificing their personal beliefs through performative advocacy in the form of branded content.

The fashion industry has long maintained a perception of high-class, quality and exclusivity with designer brands tirelessly working toward sustaining this image. So, research directed toward the fashion industry and the repercussions of its craft revealing that textile production accounts for 10% of all carbon emissions produced by humans severely tarnishes the well-kept image of the industry (McFall-Johnsen, 2020). Clothing production has seen an increase of nearly double since 2000 and at its current rate of growth, carbon emissions produced by the industry will see an increase from 10% to 26% by 2050 (McFall-Johnsen, 2020). Putting into perspective, textile production accounts for more carbon emissions than all international flights and maritime shipping combined, making it the third largest polluting industry in the world (Howell, 2021). However, carbon emissions are not the only consequence felt by the industry, as textile production increases, the rate of "clothing utilisation" (the number of times an item is worn before being disposed of) has reduced by almost a quarter from 200 in the year 2000 to 160 times in 2015 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). This coupled with the fact that 60% of all clothing manufactured is made of synthetic fabrics (Gecseg, 2019) is having an immense environmental impact on the world. Environmental impacts are but one of the major issues encapsulating the fashion industry as the increase in social awareness toward unethical labour and racial inequality has spurred further criticism of the industry. With all of these issues, where do influencers play a role and to what extent do their actions influence choices made by their followers and by the industry as a whole?

The beginning of the democratisation of fashion can be attributed to the rise in cultural relevance of fashion magazine Vogue (Pous, 2013) and later with Anna Wintour's debut cover as Editor in Chief at Vogue, including model Michaela Bercu in a pair of acid wash Guess jeans (Wintour, 2012) which was in stark contrast to the traditionally styled Vogue cover shoots that incorporated high-end haute couture garments presented in highly unobtainable settings. While this assisted in bringing fashion to the forefront of pop culture, it's true cultural spread can be linked to the rise of social media and the era of internet blogging. In "The New Gatekeepers of Fashion Week" they describe fashion influencers as needing to "perceive social value, either from their physical appearance, personality, and social status, or by appearing as similar to the receiver" (Holmstedt, 2017), the last point is the

key driver in the construction of a relatable identity for influencers. Influencers gave a fresh look into the fashion community through a much more accessible and approachable medium, giving them a voice of authority in the community as opinion leaders. The amateur nature of fashion influencers initially saw great criticism from traditional fashion publications such as Vogue, as their content was not done to the high standard of these magazines however, Instagram and other social medias alike have created a shift in the way content is consumed online favouring what is known as “the attention economy” (Zulli, 2017). The commoditisation of followers attention is an effective strategy in a fast paced landscape and with influencers growing an audience on Instagram through strategic personal branding (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016) they have become personable figure who are perceived with great trust and authority while also becoming the perfect vehicle for branded content. As opposed to traditional fashion magazines that rely on the aspirational selling of brands, fashion influencers have offered a glimpse into the exclusive world of fashion while offering up alternatives through the “trickle-down effect” that occurs in fashion (Topping, 2016).

Influencers recognised this unique position and saw the limitations of promoting aspirational brands to their followers as they were far less accessible, this began a shift toward offering affordable and accessible alternatives to their followers, selling the idea of a trend and the aspirational fulfilment of having an item that is similar to a designer piece. With brands such as Fashionnova, H&M and Zara utilising a highly efficient supply chain, these brands are able to overturn collections that appear similar in cut and shape to designer collections but at a rate that completely overshadows the manufacturing power of designer labels but at a great ethical and environmental cost (Niinimäki, et al., 2020). The short life span of trends accelerated by fast fashion, paired with the highly profitable commoditisation of attention on Instagram (Zulli, 2017) has propelled fashion influencers beyond their initial independent blogging fame. Instagram has carefully crafted a user experience that lends itself to this trend of fast paced consumption, having features that allow brands to integrate ads with influencers’ accounts, providing access for followers to buy the items their favourite influencer is wearing from within the Instagram app (Siegle, 2019).

In a pursuit to maintain relevance, Instagram influencers saw the potential of trend-based style and fast fashion labels like Fashionnova served as the perfect vehicle for this type of content. While their fast fashion partnerships may have not started out with the intent of creating a highly destructive trend cycle, their immense sway on consumer purchase decisions has accelerated the growth of fast fashion companies immensely. A research survey by the Fashion Retail Academy revealed that 54% of people believed that influencers have played a part in the overall rise in trend based clothing, with 30% of people claiming that they use Instagram for style inspiration (Skeldon, 2019). In an attempt to detach themselves from the traditional fashion community that is largely focused on the promotion of unobtainable brands, Instagram influencers have in turn created a mass trend of disposable clothing which has major repercussions for the planet. While fast fashion offers accessible pieces in a variety of sizes and styles that appeal to a much wider and usually younger demographic, it grossly disregards the immediate and future consequences brought about by the industry (Newcomb, 2020). This however, is not entirely the fault of influencers, their profession requires meticulous crafting of a personal brand with relatability sitting at the forefront of their identity and success, influencers have to be careful not to alienate their followers and fast fashion allows them to create accessible communities for fashion enthusiasts who lack the disposable income to purchase designer items regularly (Newcomb, 2020). With fashion’s impact steadily approaching a 26% carbon emission budget by 2050 (McFall-Johnsen, 2020) it is of great ethical importance that influencers accept some accountability for their actions and in turn accept the responsibility of educating their followers on the various effects of fast fashion (Frost, 2020). Traditional fashion publications have acted as the gatekeepers of the fashion industry for decades, with many fashion journalists having no formal background in journalism as they are usually ex-models, designers and stylists, this has caused their editorial and review pieces to be largely

promotional based causing a control on the flow of information (Atle, 2006). Instagram influencers, in contrast, can utilise the affordances of their medium to inform their followers effectively on many issues facing the industry and should accept the responsibility of doing so for their impressionable followers.

The tides are changing in the sphere of fashion influencers however, with movements such as the cleverly dubbed “slow fashion”, which centres around the ideology of purchasing consciously and attempting to maintain a wardrobe of quality items, it has revealed a glimpse of optimism for the fashion community (Stanton, 2020). Led by figures such as Avery Ginsberg (Ginsberg, Avery Ginsberg (@averyginsberg) | Instagram, 2021) who’s content and clothing brand Ground Cover (Ginsberg, GROUND COVER, 2021) centres around health & wellness and the promotion of ethical consumption, this new wave of fashion influencer has the potential to change purchase behaviour and consumer perception around fashion and could lead to a societal shift away from disposable fashion. Even heritage brands like Hermès are feeling the effect of the trickle-up, with their announcement of their latest handbag being made from mushroom leather (Grobe, 2021).

While Instagram has served as a medium for the fashion community to share and spread knowledge more efficiently than ever before, the pursuit of social relevance has caused a surge in unethical brands growing as a result of the attention economy that drives Instagram’s mass appeal. As influencers have managed to breakdown the gates that have been imposed on the fashion community by the elites, influencers must consider the social responsibility they owe to their followers since becoming the new opinion leaders of the community. In an attempt to continue the prolonged growth and success of the fashion community while also working toward a more environmentally conscious industry. Fashion influencers have the capacity to become a catalyst for change, should they choose to accept the responsibility.

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