The Lifespan of a Trend: The Commodification of Style, Identity in a Social Media-Driven Ultra-Fast Fashion Industry

Andrew C. Guarino

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

Communication Department, Boston College

Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

December 10, 2024

Abstract

This thesis explores fashion as a means of identity expression within the ever-evolving social media landscape, looking at TikTok in particular as it has arisen in tandem with the evolution of the infamous fast fashion industry into ultra-fast fashion. Eleven participants completed nine surveys over the course of three weeks during which they reported their lasting impressions of fashion content on the app before participating in terminal focus group sessions. Looking at TikTok's influencer ecosystem through the lens of the Frankfurt School's concept of the culture industry, this thesis argues that the capitalist business of influencers works in harmony with the ultra-fast fashion industry to promote a consumption pattern characterized by increased purchase frequency and volume of lower quality clothing designed primarily to appeal to the latest trends than to function as clothing.

Keywords: fashion, style, identity, self-expression, social media, TikTok, consumerism, trends

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis was more expensive to print than much of the clothing for sale on TikTok Shop right now is to purchase. That statement is not an indictment of printing costs — printing and binding two copies of these 94 pages only ran me $10. Rather, it serves to contextualize the state of the ultra-fast fashion industry, born out of the interconnectedness and constant communication engendered by social media and the internet at large and both a beneficiary and proponent of the expectation of instant gratification they have normalized.

This research examines fashion and its relationship to identity expression within TikTok's unique social media landscape. Given the fast-paced, algorithmically-personalized nature of the platform, this study investigates TikTok fashion trends as phenomena that function as accelerated, individualized versions of traditional industry trends, emphasizing impulse consumption fueled by ultra-fast fashion. Further, the study interrogates the social and environmental repercussions of TikTok as a fashion industry-leading hub responsible for spawning the latest trends given the platform's active participation in the ultra-fast fashion industry in the form of the recently launched TikTok Shop. Using interviews and focus groups, this research explores the phenomenon of how TikTok fashion content mediates users' senses of style and, subsequently, identities.

The aim of this thesis is to better understand how TikTok, given all that it has done to alter the landscape of social media, has specifically impacted fashion trends and, subsequently, its users' identity exploration, formation, and practice. Given the relationships both between fashion and identity and fashion and trends, this study looks to

understand how social media, as a medium centered on trends (with none more

trend-driven than TikTok), has altered identity conception and expression as the result of

how it has changed the fashion industry. Additionally, as social media is an increasingly

commercialized space, it provides an apt opportunity to examine practices of

consumption in a world where lives are increasingly lived online.

As will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, there is already a large body of

existing literature dedicated to fashion (and even style more broadly) as a means of

identity expression, which this study aims to expand upon by using TikTok as a lens

through which this phenomenon can be observed. Even most previous studies that have

examined social media or the internet as they relate to identity expression have yet to

focus on TikTok given its relatively recent rise to prominence. Aside from its boom in

popularity, TikTok makes for a unique platform to study this phenomenon given its

extreme optimizations in user experience, which include but are not limited to: a user

interface designed for maximum engagement, a short form style of content, and an

emphasis on algorithmically pushing new trends and types of content, rather than the

specific users one follows. Altogether, the platform's recent success that has it poised to

be the future of social media makes it an immensely relevant site for examining identity

expression in the digital age.

In the third chapter, the theoretical lens of Theodor W. Adorno and Max

Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry will be explained as it relates to the

capitalist influencer business that has come to dominate social media ecosystems, with

TikTok being no exception. In the fourth chapter, the rationale and design of the

multi-method data collection process used will be explained. Chapter five will discuss the

numerous common themes and conversations that emerged in the data, including

awareness of social media consumption habits, the abundance of advertisements on

TikTok, the notion of authenticity in one's sense of style, the ways in which young adults

acquire and consume information, and ethical and environmental concerns about the

ultra-fast fashion industry. Finally, the last chapter will recapitulate the preceding sections

and the ultimate argument about the ways in which the newly emerged social

media-driven ultra-fast fashion industry raises concerns about what it means to

experience identity through fashion in a world where trends are moving more quickly

than ever before.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to establish an understanding of fashion as a means of communicating identity, both historically online and presently on TikTok, while also explaining how these trends have broader damaging social implications. To start, the extensive historical relationship between fashion and identity exploration, formation, and expression will be discussed. Fashion will be discussed as a historical means of expressing and practicing social class before examining the phenomenon of democratized fashion as it has engendered exploration of personal identity through modes of dress. With this in mind, the subsequent focus will be the internet as a platform for this identity formation — primarily through the use of blogs and social media. Then, TikTok's emergence within the social media landscape will be discussed as it relates to fashion, identity, and the ways in which the two existed previously on the internet. Finally, the fashion processes discussed throughout will be examined in the context of their relationship to the well-documented social and environmental harms of the fashion industry.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout the array of literature on fashion, a wide range of terminology has been used, with certain words at times assuming different meanings. For the purposes of this research, the following keywords listed are used with the meanings provided unless otherwise specified. "Clothing" refers simply to the articles one wears, while "fashion," is used to refer at times to the fashion industry, but otherwise to the styles of dress one assumes in more contemporary contexts (e.g. one's "fashion sense") (Crane, 2000; Delhaye, 2006; Lynch & Strauss, 2007). "Dress," as the act of performing a fashion

sense, encompasses items beyond simply clothing used in crafting a "social skin" to express one's identity (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 13). In essence, dress is a particular enactment of a fashion sense. Finally, "identity" is meant broadly to encompass all aspects including but not limited to self-image (Parekh & Schmidt, 2003), cultural values (Crane, 2000), and the psychological concept of the "self" as "a slowly developed sense of who and what we are both externally and internally [over the course of a life span]... of interest to us in the fashion field because the clothes we wear are believed to be fundamentally integrated with our sense of self" (Lynch & Strauss 2007, p. 13). Bearing in mind these distinctions and definitions, the subsequent section will examine the function of fashion as a means of expressing identity as defined above.

Fashion and Identity

Fashion and clothing are some of the preeminent, most personal modes of nonverbal communication (Barnard, 1996, p. 26). But even beyond just being forms of communication,

> Fashion and clothing are some of the ways, then, in which the social order is experienced, explored, communicated and reproduced…ways in which people communicate, not only things like feeling and mood, but also the values, hopes and beliefs of the social groups of which they are members. (Barnard, 1996, p. 36)

There exists a plethora of literature examining the ever-evolving use of fashion as a means of identity and self-expression for its ability to visually communicate identity. It is known that "through clothing people communicate some things about their persons, and at the collective level this results typically in locating them symbolically in some structured universe of status claims and life-style attachments" (Davis, 2008, p. 4).

Historically, fashion has served as one of the primary means for social identification among classes in highly stratified societies (Crane, 2000, p. 1). In preindustrial societies, how one dressed was a veritable statement of one's place within a social hierarchy, encompassing not just socioeconomic status, but also gender, occupation, and/or religion (Ewen, 1985). Even during industrialization, wide gaps between social classes made this performative expression of superiority/inferiority through clothing an integral part of maintaining social order (Crane, 2000, p. 4). For those on the outskirts of industrializing Western societies like the large immigrant population of the nineteenth-century United States, clothing was a way to realign oneself with the culture of one's new home. Through clothing, it became possible (and popular) for immigrants to "fake it till you make it," abandoning the styles of dress typical to their previous lives and adapting that of their new ones in an attempt to blend in (Crane, 2000, p. 5; Heinze, 1990, p. 90). This attempt for immigrants to camouflage through clothing was all-encompassing — efforts to blend in required dressing the part for one's new social and occupational identities, not merely new national ones.

But just as what one wore functioned to label them on the basis of class, clothing became an outlet for identity negotiation, presenting the prospect of upward mobility through social strata to all who sought it. In line with the "fake it till you make it" ethos of immigrants, clothing's capacity to communicate status made it an often-tried path pursued by those seeking upward mobility — if one could dress as if they were even the slightest bit wealthier than they truly were, they could be perceived and treated as such (Crane, 2000, p. 67). In this sense, clothing has long borne the responsibility of being

both the source and product of identity assumption and role performance in a given society.

One of the prime and more enduring instances of clothing's function to demarcate and uphold class distinctions can be found in the social function of hats among men in industrialized Western societies, which endured until the mid-twentieth century. Unlike today, where hats are often perceived as being inappropriate for the majority of social and professional situations, during the course of industrialization, hats were long an essential part of men's socially-regulated dress code, with each one of the handful of different hat styles ultimately finding itself within the uniform of a particular social class (Crane, 2000, pp. 82-87).

But even hats and their social function have grown tired to the strength of an increasingly democratized world of fashion. While there are a number of theories as to what has engendered the observable shift away from rigidly defined social dress codes based on factors like class, they are generally united by attributing the nascent prevalence of social blurring in contemporary fashion to the emergence of the middle class (at least in Western societies) and globalization (Crane, 2000, pp. 9, 67). Where inter- and intra-class mobility is high, class takes a backseat in identity formation (Kingston, 1994 as cited in Crane, 2000, p. 9), opening up the possibility for people to pursue identity through the exploration and expression of specific lifestyles, which increasingly reflect personal style, culture, and interests rather than occupation (Machin & Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 577). Exacerbating and accelerating this shift privileging lifestyle over class as the foundation for identity has been the increased efforts of marketing firms to use new technologies to target audiences as precisely as possible (resulting in audience

"hypersegmentation") (Turow, 1997, p. 193). With forced adherence to one's class role out of the picture, clothing's capacity to "say things" about oneself propels it to become a key aspect of identity formation and expression, acting "as a kind of visual metaphor for identity… registering the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities" (Davis, 2008, p. 25; Stone, 1962).

As class identification has become less salient, the rise of "consumer fashion" in the twentieth century has ushered in more diversity, as consumers place themselves within the breadth of culture at large. With "much more stylistic diversity and much less consensus about what is 'in fashion' at a particular time… consumer fashion incorporates tastes and concerns of social groups at all social class levels" (Crane, 2000, pp. 134-135). Crane (2000, p. 161) sees this change as being endemic to the recent geographical dispersion of the fashion production system, as globalization has brought interconnectedness in both communication technologies and production processes. With such a wide variety of options, each going in and out of style as time passes, one's choice of clothing is a decisive statement of alignment within an ever-complicated web of cultural connectivity (Kaiser et al., 1991, p. 166). Altogether, the present symbiosis between fashion and identity falls in line with the long-held notion that "fashion is, on the one hand, a means of expressing one's place within a social group, and on the other hand a means of 'individual accentuation of personality'" (Simmel, 1904, p. 309 as cited in Delhaye, 2006, p. 88).

Despite the democratization of fashion that has supported the expression of personal identity and superseded class as its key determinant, gender identity remains a prevalent division in fashion. For centuries, enforcing adherence to gender norms has

been one of — if not the — principal function of fashion, even ahead of social class

(Crane, 2000, p. 16). And while class has been greatly reduced in its significance, gender

norms as determinants of fashionable identity have largely endured despite opposition.

Clothing items and accessories like the necktie, suit jacket, and fedora (to name just a

few) have all been used by women as forms of nonverbal resistance to the both literally

and figuratively restrictive styles of dress enforced upon them for centuries (Crane, 2000;

Davis, 2008). But insofar as resistance to fashion-based enforcement of gender norms is

rooted in women's adoption of traditionally masculine garments, divisions between

gendered styles of dress have endured and continue to, especially given men's general

reluctance to similarly adopt traditionally feminine elements of fashion (Davis, 2008, p.

33).

  While the largest, women are far from the only demographic that has looked to

fashion to refuse and combat their exclusion from the hegemonic culture. An expansive

body of work examining the use of fashion among subculture groups has found it to be

one of their most central aspects, as "fashion, dress and clothing are… constitutive of

those groups, rather than merely reflective of them" (Barnard, 1996, p. 37). For groups

like the UK punk scene, dress became a way to make a statement without saying a word,

signifying a rejection of certain, more mainstream values by coming to embody this

rejection as a group (Hebdige, 1988).

  But just as fashion is an outlet for people to express themselves, fashion and

identity are intimately connected and cooperative, simultaneously shaping and being

shaped by each other. Particularly in women, who are the target audience of more fashion

media and marketing content than men, the pursuit of an aspirational identity in fashion

bestows upon fashion media and marketing the power to shape these aspirational

identities of women. The fashion content people consume holds gravity on their identities

beyond simply what is bought and worn; there also exists a psychological component

insofar as fashion media affects self-image, and subsequently, identity (Parekh &

Schmidt, 2003). While the extent to which fashion media is responsible for women's

self-image is not definitively known, multiple studies have been conducted and found a

strong relationship between women's level of fashion interest and a negative self-image

expressed either through eating disorders or fat-shaming (Parekh & Schmidt, 2003;

Peters, 2014). The effects of fashion content on (women's) body image are far-reaching,

as:

> Even when fashion is not of central concern, it figures heavily in discussions
>
> about the body since dress in everyday life is always more than a shell, it is an
>
> intimate aspect of the presentation of the self and is so closely linked to the
>
> identity that… dress, the body and the self … are not perceived separately but
>
> simultaneously, as a totality. (Entwistle, 2000, p. 10 as cited in Peters, 2014, p. 47)

While self-image and body image are important components of identity formation

that often take shape in one's dress, they are not alone. Particularly in adolescents, a

desire to be perceived a certain way — assuming an idealized self — is a significant

factor in identity formation and subsequently, dress. To the extent that fashion and dress

are used to communicate cultural values and interests, one's fashionable identity is often

used as an outlet for performing one's tastes, with the ephemeral notion of "good taste"

being socially constructed (Michael, 2015, p. 165; Kuipers, 2006; West, 2010). As an act

of performing this "trendiness," (particularly for adolescents) fashioned identity at times

falls victim to being a performance of an idealized self rather than one's true self given

the balancing act between one's trendiness — a central indicator of social capital — and

one's identity, with each shaping and being shaped by the other (Michael, 2015). The

particular importance of identity formation and social capital accumulation among

adolescents is linked to the tendencies in Western cultures (particularly the U.S.) towards

both individualism and consumption (Badaoui et al., 2018, p. 72; Cassidy & van

Schijndel, 2011; Kroger, 1996). It has even been suggested that adolescence as a stage of

development is itself a Western construct borne out of these practices (Kroger, 1996).

What constitutes trendiness in fashion is complex and often subjective, but generally

speaking, an article of clothing's trendiness is reflected in the product itself and its

corresponding brand identity. In the simplest terms, dress is a means of embodying and

performing identity, so the social and cultural power of something like a certain fashion

brand is instrumental (Chittenden, 2010, p. 507).

One's clothing choices are the sum total of a myriad of factors, most notably

family, age, gender, peers, media, and celebrity culture, which directly shape identity and

thus indirectly one's dress. It is through these factors contributing to identity formation

that trendiness is enforced among and upon adolescents (Badaoui et al., 2018).

Ultimately, clothing consumption practices, expressed through dress, are part of

adolescents' education, socialization, and identity formation, making them a particularly

significant demographic to study as an instance of fashion's relationship to identity

formation (Benn, 2004, p. 108).

Fashion's relationship to identity expression and formation is extensive and is

nothing new. That said, the nature of this relationship has evolved considerably in the

past few decades given the emergence of democratized fashion, which has resulted in a shift away from fashion as a means of expressing class identity in favor of fashion as a means of expressing and exploring personal identity. Nonetheless, some of fashion's limitations on identity have endured, namely its impositions on gender expression. Given the relationship between fashion and identity, fashion media has the capacity to shape self-image and identity by setting the agenda for what, or rather who, is in/out of fashion. Finally, a key factor in fashion-based identity formation — particularly among adolescents — is the pursuit of social capital; ephemeral, ambiguous notions of what is trendy or cool shape identities and are shaped by them on a massive scale. Ultimately, "...by whatever operation, when successful, fashion manages through symbolic means to resonate exquisitely with the shifting, highly self-referential collective tensions and moods abroad in the land. Indeed, in so doing it more than lends expression to them; it helps shape and define them as well" (Davis, 2008, p. 18).

The Internet as a Space for Identity Development

In the past few decades, the internet has posed an ever-evolving platform for identity exploration, formation, and expression, particularly among young people who are seen as "digital natives" (Chittenden, 2010; Palfrey & Glasser, 2008). With fashion as an established mode of identity expression, it may seem that fashion and the internet exist as separate spheres of identity communication — one being based in the "real world," and the other behind a screen. While dress is about real-world presentation, the internet (can be) much more anonymized. But given the internet's capacity for and increased gravitation towards visual media, these two spheres often find themselves intersecting, creating an entirely novel space for identity play and experimentation (Chittenden, 2010,

p. 512). It is at this intersection that this study looks to probe, in line with a considerable body of research (Cheung & Choi, 2022; Chittenden, 2010; Choi, 2020; Kristensen & Christensen, 2017; Titton, 2015).

The most primitive form of identity play online came in the form of blogs, whereby anyone could upload their thoughts, feelings, and voice on any subject for the rest of the world to see. Fashion blogs are often characterized by written entries based on their personal lives, experiences, and interests related to fashion accompanied by images — some taken by the blogger, but many copied from other sources (websites, magazines, etc.). Trends like "Outfit of the Day" (now often tagged on social media by its acronym, #ootd) — which, as the name implies, features a photo of one's outfit for the day accompanied by a caption — are popular on blogs and across social media platforms (Chittenden, 2010, p. 506; Lanphear, 2022). Ultimately, while the blogosphere has largely been replaced by social media in the last decade — with sites like Instagram essentially acting as a hub for blogs, with more infrastructure to support the discovery of new, related content — they are nonetheless still relevant as sites of identity formation integral to understanding how these practices have come to operate on platforms like Instagram.

Instagram can be seen as a particularly apt evolution of the blogs that dominated the online fashion ecosystem throughout the aughts. Its integration of images and the lack of restriction on text length makes it better suited for blog-like content than the platform best known as Twitter, while the online ecosystem based around hashtags and the "Explore" page encourages expansion beyond simply keeping up with one's inner social circle through the internet as on Facebook[1] (Cheung & Choi, 2022, p. 3). All the while,

---

[1] It is worth noting that, in recent years, many social media platforms have appropriated features from each other, becoming less and less distinct. Some examples are as follows: Twitter has increased its character count, Facebook has added Explore elements, and Instagram has added Explore elements to the home page,

Instagram brings the blogosphere onto one concentrated platform designed, first and foremost, for mobile use — adapting the blogosphere to an increasingly mobile-based internet that keeps users more constantly engaged in it (Kim & Ko, 2010). Most notably, platforms like Instagram make posting easy — one does not need to make a blog themselves to join the discussion. Simply by having an account, everyone is simultaneously invited to be both a consumer and creator. Thus, in exploring fashion content on the internet broadly, this research will primarily center on blogs and Instagram, referring to them somewhat interchangeably as most of what is true of how blogs have been used in the fashion world is also true of Instagram (if not also other social media platforms) as a sort of "Blogosphere 2.0."

Blogs function as discursive spaces where the subject matter (fashion) becomes a means to an end, as:

The genuine base of power does not come from the material or cultural wealth of its agents alone, but from their capacity to convert it into social and symbolic capital. The discursive spaces formed through the interaction of bloggers and their followers (i.e. the people who regularly read and post comments to a blog) facilitate a process of exchange, whereby teens can exploit their fashion tastes to increase the value of their social capital. (Bourdieu, 1993, as cited in Chittenden, 2010, p. 506)

Thus, the internet blogosphere functions as grounds for the identity play and pursuit of social capital innate to a democratized fashion on a mass scale for both bloggers and

essentially creating its own version of TikTok's "For You Page" (to be discussed). Facebook and Instagram have both adopted "Stories" from Snapchat, as did Twitter briefly. Overall, the platforms have somewhat converged; nonetheless, when speaking about what makes them distinct, simply note that, while some of these differences may not remain, they once existed, and still have shaped the platform into what it is/is not.

readers alike (Michael, 2015). It expands the pursuit of social capital and identity play

from one's personal life to the rest of the world, and the potential anonymity it provides

creates a unique opportunity for experimentation; internet users are thus exposed to and

capable of experimenting with a much broader range of identities (Chittenden, 2010;

Titton, 2015).

　　　　Another defining element of the blogosphere is its relationship with and among

the media. Over the years, select bloggers and social media influencers have, in certain

cases, been appropriated by/legitimized to the level of media outlets through appearances

alongside mainstream media at major events around the world like fashion weeks,

placing these internet fashion creators at a crossroads between an individual and a media

outlet (Kristensen & Christensen, 2017; Rocamora, 2013, p. 68; Titton, 2015, p. 202).

The dual-role bloggers assume when acting as fashion media while still using fashion as

an identity practice creates a complicated balancing act wherein the professional and

personal begin to blend as the media ecosystem imposes upon the ability of fashion

blogging to serve as a means of identity play (Rocamora, 2011).

　　　　The internet at large — particularly by way of blogs and social media — has

contributed to what Kristensen & Christensen (2017) have coined the "mediatization of

fashion." The mediatization of fashion can be understood as a step beyond the mediation

of fashion, as fashion is not simply being communicated online, but rather the very nature

and characteristics of these online platforms for communicating fashion serve to alter the

dynamics of the fashion industry and its communication structure entirely (Kristensen &

Christensen, 2017, p. 227). Mediatization is intimately tied to the democratization of

fashion, mentioned in the previous section, and encapsulating how fashion has

increasingly become a personal means of identity expression rather than a way of

expressing one's assigned social class in a hierarchical society. In simpler terms,

mediatization looks at how the fashion industry has been reshaped by the internet's

revolution of communication infrastructure, while democratization refers more

specifically to how people's ability to dress in different ways, less constrained by class

identity, has been opened up. Democratization is, at least in part, attributable to the

communication infrastructure behind the mediatization of fashion (Lynch & Strauss,

2007, p. 1; Kristensen & Christensen, 2017, p. 227).

The complementary relationship between the two has long been discussed, and

can be seen in how the internet platforming every individual with a mass audience "has

created a cultural fascination with projected identity," sometimes also referred to as a

"yearned identity," suggesting a desire to bridge the gap between true identity and the

desired, projected one (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 4; Choi, 2020, p. 654). The notion of a

projected identity is linked to the democratization of fashion simply by nature of being a

type of identity formation; projected identity illustrates mediatization in that it is a

substantive way in which identity play has been (re)shaped by the mediatization of

fashion — one of identity's central means of expression. Projected identity is

demonstrative of how phenomena like mediatization and democratization take effect in

everyday life and serve to complicate fashion's capacity to truly communicate identity.

The oft-loathed adolescent fixations on physical appearance and social media clout said

to border on narcissism are rooted in this concept of projected identity, and the influence

of social comparison to projected selves has been studied as part of a larger body of work

on mass media's influence on self-concept in the form of notions such as body image

(Choi, 2020, p. 653; Williams, 2006).

As far as dress is concerned, the effects of the mediatization of fashion are

far-reaching. While the internet introduces the potential for broader identity exploration,

opening up doors to see styles around the world, it is not a one-way street through which

users take in new fashion knowledge; it also creates a certain degree of pressure,

providing a platform for people to perform identities — not necessarily the same as their

own — in a sort of mediatization of the self (Titton, 2015, p. 210). Ultimately, the

internet, in all its forms, provides users with a canvas for performing an identity less

necessarily bound to the real world (Cheung & Choi, 2022). The internet as a discursive

space serves to blur the lines between to what extent a blogger/influencer's content is

accurate to the life of the person posting. As narratives of personal experience, blogs, in

particular, constitute "a mediated and objectified form of self-reference," rather than pure

biographical authenticity (Titton, 2015, p. 205).

The internet confuses fashion's otherwise relatively straightforward relationship

to identity. With the internet, people now have a space to assume and perform different

identities, whether they are idealized versions of the self or complete experimentations of

the self. At the same time, the success of some blogs that places them among mainstream

media also blurs the line between authentic personal expression and a facade of

authenticity (Cheung & Choi, 2022; Titton, 2015). The performance of identity —

usually an idealized one — on the part of the blogger subsequently functions as media

consumed by others, thus shaping other identities, often negatively (Choi, 2020). In any

case, the internet has served to mediatize fashion, reshaping how fashion is

communicated and experienced, and thus how identity can be developed through it
(Kristensen & Christensen, 2017).

TikTok: The New Face of Social Media

In the past few years, the social media landscape has been reshaped by the
emergence of TikTok, a short-form video-based social media application that now stands
among social media giants like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. TikTok is the
international sister app of the Chinese social media platform Douyin, with both owned by
the parent company ByteDance (Abidin, 2020, p. 77). Launched in 2017, its growth was
largely bolstered by ByteDance's acquisition of and merger with the already-established
app Musical.ly that same year (Zeng et al., 2021, p. 3162). After years of growth, TikTok
skyrocketed to the forefront of the social media scene during the COVID-19 pandemic,
when millions of people were quarantined and seeking entertainment (Abidin, 2020, p.
77).

While it draws heavily from Douyin, many of the things that have made TikTok
successful have been fairly revolutionary to the Western social media landscape, which
was initially conceived as a means of keeping in touch with people that one already
knows. The app, rather than be built around the posts of one's friends, is fixed around the
"For You Page" (FYP), which is an endless stream of videos for users to scroll through,
one at a time. Thus, the app is founded on an algorithm that seeks to understand one's
tastes in order to follow each video up with one even better suited to the user's liking
(Schellewald, 2021, p. 1438). This stands somewhat in opposition to platforms like
Instagram, which (until a recent update that makes its homepage more like TikTok's
FYP) only features on one's homepage the posts of accounts the user follows. TikTok is

able to thrive without relying on only showing users the content of their friends and

family through their algorithm, which is ByteDance's primary intellectual asset whose

"intricate logic…is to make the scrolling experience as addictive as possible" and "which

solidified [ByteDance's] reputation on a global stage and brought its windfall through

content personalization technology" (Zeng et al., 2021, p. 3163). So while TikTok's

success has been in part because of successful strategic endeavors like the acquisition of

Musical.ly, which helped them capture the Gen Z market, the sustained relevance of the

platform is attributable to the highly personalized "algorithmic black box" that provides

users with an endless stream of content catered to their most specific interests (Bucher,

2017, p. 42; Zeng et al., 2021).

Looking beyond the algorithm, much of the public discourse surrounding TikTok

has been fixated either on the fear that it is a social plague believed to be responsible for

deteriorating children's attention spans or the myth of TikTok as a security concern[2] as it

is a Chinese application that, like all forms of social media, collects data from its users.

Despite this, much scholarship has sought to refute these anxieties about the app, looking

at it instead as a new communicative practice now embedded in everyday life just as any

other. In part due to its rise in popularity during the beginning of the COVID-19

pandemic, TikTok has come to house a lot of political content, which has been the focus

of much of the academic work surrounding the platform (Abidin, 2020; Lupinacci, 2021;

Schellewald, 2021). Emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was concurrent

with a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and the 2020 presidential election, "in the

climate of 'call-out cultures' and 'cancel cultures' TikTok has allowed young people to

---

[2] This is to say nothing of the ongoing attempt by the Biden administration to ban TikTok, in part over these same security concerns — the second attempt by the U.S. government to ban the app. See Maheshwari & Holpuch, 2024.

become politically engaged in a format that is entertaining, educational, and palatable among their peers" (Abidin, 2020, p. 84). While much of public discourse has looked to the social ills and threats to American security posed by TikTok, the potential for political engagement among youth has been the focus of much academia.

But academia has not been entirely positive towards TikTok, either, with some suggesting that it is just the latest development in the ever-evolving "attention economy" wherein attention is a form of capital for which an increasing number of entities are constantly competing (Abidin, 2020; Goldhaber, 1997). With an algorithm that no one outside of ByteDance truly understands catering to users' tastes while pumping an endless stream of content down the drop feeder-like FYP, "the frequent possibility of accessing 'relevant' content, and consequently living interesting experiences, combined with infinite scrolling and an endless influx of messages and notifications, can be very persuasive in ensuring continuous connectedness," though "the expectations constructed by this fueled sense of ongoing anticipation, however, are rarely met" (Lupinacci, 2021, p. 285).

Given the drop feeder of content on TikTok, there is concern about growing passivity that has permeated throughout history and was famously aroused by media theorist Neil Postman surrounding television (1986). With a shift towards television and away from printed media, Postman mourned the loss of intellectual engagement to the passive consumption of television media under the notion that a medium's "form excludes the content," meaning that any given medium is constrained in what ideas it can communicate (1986, p. 7). TikTok's existence as a platform that houses everything Postman sees television taking from printed media — news, entertainment, ideas,

advertising — and placing it in a space that simultaneously is seen as eroding attention

spans and intellectual engagement showcases its capacity to alter the very way in which

people interact with each other and the media they consume. Another criticism Postman

levied that is all the more true of TikTok today than it was of television at the time is the

"Now… this" format of the 24-hour news cycle, through which newscasters quickly pivot

from one topic to the next, as:

> There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so
>
> costly — for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so
>
> threatening — that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying
>
> "Now… this." (1986, p. 99)

On TikTok, as long as the algorithm registers them all as potential interests of a user, one

could very well be shown a video of all of these things in succession — without so much

as a "Now… this" to signal the incoming dissonance between what was just shown and

what is about to follow — training viewers in the art of not "carry[ing] over any thought

or feeling from one parcel of time to another" (Postman, 1986, p. 100).

The content personalization technology used on TikTok has sparked and come to

be embodied by the phenomenon of "sides" of TikTok. While now outdated, the trend

that dominated in 2020 saw users making "If you see this…" style videos that proclaimed

that if a user saw a certain video, that was an indication that the algorithm thought they

liked x style of content that the video's creator self-/was associated with. "The underlying

intention is for the viewer's engagements with the post to teach the TikTok algorithmic

recommendation system to serve them more of such similar posts" in a kind of practice

colloquially known as "engagement farming," where users make videos that specifically

encourage viewers to interact (Abidin, 2020, p. 88). The creator seeks engagement so the

video performs well in the algorithm that is known to prioritize engagement (likes,

comments, shares, favorites, etc.), while the viewer is encouraged to engage under the

assumption that the "side" of TikTok they are being presented is one they would like to

remain on (which is likely, given the aforementioned highly personalized nature of the

algorithm). As Abidin (2020) explains, these "rabbit holes and silos may be actual

subcultures on TikTok, like 'Black Australian TikTok' or comically esoteric ones, like

'mcdonalds tiktok'" (p. 88). Thus, the "sides" of TikTok — however informal as they are

— at the very least have the capacity to be grounds for community and connection within

the larger drop feeder of content. At the same time, these rabbit holes are a type of

"me-centered networks" symptomatic of how the internet:

> Links the world together, but at the same time, results in the creation of personal
>
> space within a global network. In this interconnected world, net citizens occupy a
>
> small space around their individual interests, and this also reflects a sense of
>
> narcissism of where they can present and display themselves. (Choi, 2020, p. 661)

So while these communities have the capacity to be productive, they can also function

like echo chambers, closing people off within a space that is, in theory, meant to "put the

world at one's fingertips."

At the same time, just as these rabbit holes make for community building, putting

users into boxes of interest groups simultaneously allows them to be marketized and

turned into a commodity for advertisers looking to reach more specific target audiences.

In this sense, TikTok (and all social media, to some extent) has increasingly looked to

turn its consumers into commodities, turning users into numbers and making them

passive subjects to the algorithm's decisions in regard to the content they consume. By siloing users into different audiences, the extensive range of different communities created function to make it such that "Something [is] provided for everyone so that no one may escape; differences are hammered home and propagated" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 97). If every member of every conceivable subcultural group can feel as if they found a community for them on TikTok thanks to their highly personalized feeds, they will feel encouraged to continue using the app and engaging with similar content. In this sense, the rabbit holes of TikTok are similar to the audience "hypersegmentation" seen in the democratization of fashion, as marketing has sought to target audiences as directly as possible (Turow, 1997, p. 193). TikTok hammers home these divisions, putting people into all sorts of different, increasingly small boxes to sell to advertisers (Cassidy & van Schijndel, 2011, p. 163).

Aside from the aforementioned political content that has been the subject of much research (Abidin, 2020; Lupinacci, 2021; Schellewald, 2021), another central feature of TikTok (and other social media, at least in certain cases) that has been discussed is its ephemeral nature. While other social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram constrain ephemerality by limiting it to certain features (e.g. "Stories"), TikTok embraces it, with short-form content that is, "by design, consumed in light of a new video standing ready to replace the current" (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1439). And with the emphasis on the FYP, anyone can be shown anyone else's videos. TikTok's FYP thus de-emphasizes the creator, as the primary stream of content consumption is based only in part on who one follows, as a mere factor in a much larger, more complex algorithm determining the content shown. On a platform that is less creator-driven, TikTok's more video-by-video

handling of content makes a space where the content is itself entirely ephemeral — it is easy for anyone to have a video perform well, but sustaining success to garner a following is much more difficult. So not only is the content ephemeral — with each video being so brief in waiting to be replaced by the next — but the creators are as well. Consequently, TikTok becomes a platform where users experience ephemerality on both ends — as both viewers and creators — as everything is fleeing (Abidin, 2020).

Overall, much research has already been done surrounding TikTok and digital cultures (Zeng et al., 2021, p. 3166). As with blogs and other social media platforms, TikTok has the capacity for identity play and formation and is a particularly relevant site for studying adolescent identity development and expression. Especially given its history with Musical.ly, TikTok makes for an interesting case of identity formation through music and dance, which are among the focal points of the app's design and have been reflected in some of the most conventionally popular content on the app (Abidin, 2020).

Little research has been conducted on TikTok's relationship with fashion, though a growing body of research is developing in Indonesia (Alfurqon, 2023; Pangalila & Aprilanty, 2022). A study looking at TikTok fashion hauls on Gen Z purchase decisions found the app to have a significant influence on their purchase decisions, demonstrating the promise of studying fashion content on TikTok (Pangalila & Aprilanty, 2022). However, some of the research published is not currently available in English (Alfurqon, 2023), and no research has looked at fashion content on TikTok in relation to identity exploration. As this study is otherwise situated in the context of American adolescent social media user and consumer practices, it looks to contribute to the work being done in

Indonesia and apply it to U.S. contexts in an attempt to better understand the new face of the social media industry.

The Fashion Cycle and (Un)Sustainability

In light of the shift from dress as a means of expressing class identity to the development of consumer identity, fashion as an industry has become wide-open, flooded with countless styles and variations of items as it has become a playground for identity expression and placing oneself within the broad realm of culture at large. In part because of the internet and the growing interconnectedness of the world, there is "much more stylistic diversity and much less consensus about what is 'in fashion' at a particular time" (Crane, 2000, p. 134). At the same time, "the rapid turnover of information has become a trait, more generally, of online fashion media" (Rocamora, 2013, p. 69). Fashion websites and pages are constantly promoting the latest, newest thing that is "in," hammering home the ephemerality of fashion goods as "the flow of posts replicates the flow of goods" (Rocamora, 2013, p. 72). With fashion being so broad, global, and expedited, the fashion industry is then tasked with applying the cycle of what is "in" and "out" at a given time on a massive scale.

It is universally accepted that fashion functions as something of a cycle — what is in at one point will, in some amount of time, be replaced by something that would have previously been considered to be out, only to go out of style again (Davis, 2008, p. 104). The rate at which this cycle moves is more debated. It is generally agreed that it has accelerated considerably since the end of World War II, but now it is questioned if the cycle is at risk of ceasing to exist at all (Davis, 2008, p. 105-107). Styles of dress that used to stay in for years now stay in for months, if even. With a fashion cycle that only

gets faster, "fashion pluralism" has been proposed as a way of conceptualizing the coexistence of many different styles of contemporary dress (Davis, 2008, p. 107). The idea of fashion pluralism, as it relates to TikTok's rabbit holes, is one that this research looks to probe further.

On the production end of fashion, the plurality of styles of dress available to consumers comes as a capitalization on the democratization of fashion as a means of identity expression. Fashion (over)consumption has been found to coincide with the most critical periods of identity development like adolescence (McNeill & Venter, 2019, p. 368). With style as an endless pursuit, the growing plethora of identity options for consumers can be overwhelming, especially for adolescents (Lynch & Strauss, 2007, p. 81). With adolescents prone to overconsume in pursuit of an identity, it is both only natural and also potentially concerning that they are often targets of the latest fashion trends and marketing given their predisposition to be perpetually in pursuit of something new (Cassidy & van Schijndel, 2011). As social identities, particularly those of adolescents, are "forever in ferment" and riddled with instability, fashion feeds on and profits off unstable, developing identities (Davis, 2008, p. 17).

Overconsumption aside, the sheer production of fashion on such a massive scale has come increasingly under fire for its unsustainability. The practice of fast fashion — meaning the rapid mass production of cheap (both in quality and price) clothing capitalizing on the latest fleeting trend — has become the dominant business model for apparel stores (Witzburg, 2021, p. 706-707). In a digital age, fast fashion is:

A fashion of rapid commodity circulation, of quick response to consumer wants, of fast production and fast consumption. However, fashion is made not only of

material but also of symbolic goods. In that respect, fast fashion is also fast

symbolic fashion, the rapid circulation of fashion images and words…

(Rocamora, 2013, p. 68)

Fashion outlets accelerated turnover and shortened the life cycles of their products in an

effort to encourage more and more consumption over time (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p.

129-130). Additionally, social media has become a key player in disseminating these

ever-shortening trends, accelerating further the pace of fast fashion (Dzhengiz et al.,

2023, p. 20). Meanwhile, the fashion industry has risen to become the second most

polluting industry (Diabat et al., 2014, p. 1713) and is responsible for more global carbon

emissions than international flights and maritime shipping combined (World Bank, 2019).

This is to make no mention of the well-documented poor working conditions that include

child labor and modern slavery in order to make fast fashion as fast as it is (Haug &

Busch, 2015; Peake & Kenner, 2020; Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020 as cited in

Dzhengiz et al., 2023). The exploitation at the heart of the fast fashion industry is perhaps

best illustrated by the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013, where

more than 1000 workers were killed in the deadliest garment factory accident in history

(Haines et al., 2023).

Despite the exploitation of the fast fashion industry, which has become

increasingly known in recent years (Haines et al., 2023), the internet has remained a

breeding ground for overconsumption practices, particularly among adolescents.

"Fashion haul" videos have become a popular style of content, originating on YouTube

and having since expanded to other platforms like TikTok. They are, as the name implies,

categorized by the video's creator showing their audience a haul of the latest, most in

fashion. They are most popular among younger adolescent audiences and depict the

creator in an influencer role as someone being looked up to who is encouraging

consumption (Allen & Mendick, 2016; Haines et al., 2023). These fashion haul videos

may even be sponsored, as they are a type of electronic word of mouth that functions to

greatly bolster the image of the brands featured, given how they have been found to

influence consumer attitudes, brand awareness, and purchase decisions (Bläse et al.,

2024, p. 628).

Having established the environmental and social damages of the fashion industry,

particularly fast fashion, and given their relationship to how fashion marketing and

content are targeted at those most enraptured in the endless pursuit of identity, the notion

of sustainability has become an increasingly hot topic in fashion discourse (McNeill &

Venter, 2019). There is much research to suggest a growing level of social consciousness

regarding sustainability among consumers (Bläse, et al., 2024; Haines et al., 2023;

McNeill & Venter, 2019). While exact definitions of sustainability and sustainable

behavior vary, the commonalities often lie in a reduction of inequality and harm to the

environment (United Nations, 2015). For the fashion industry, sustainable behavior thus

encompasses the production and consumption of goods made not only with a reduced

environmental impact but also better, non-exploitative working conditions (McNeill &

Venter, 2019).

But the innovation of the digital age stops for nothing, so naturally, fast fashion

has gotten even faster, despite growing consciousness of its exploitation and

environmental harms. In something of a response to the consciousness about the dark side

of fast fashion, "ultra-fast fashion" (Weinswig, 2017 as cited in Camargo et al., 2020), as

it is called, stands to threaten both the "slow fashion" pro-sustainable consumption movements and fast fashion itself (Dzhengiz et al., 2023). Among the ultra-fast fashion giants are Asos, Boohoo, and Missguided (Hendriksz, 2017), though fast fashion brands like Zara and H&M have begun to attempt implementing ultra-fast models themselves (Dzhengiz, 2023). As it is a relatively recent development in the fashion industry, ultra-fast fashion has yet to be the subject of much academic research. The main distinguishing features of ultra-fast from fast fashion are even shorter lead times, with items moving from design to sale in days, rather than weeks. So while fast fashion is focused on trend forecasting, ultra-fast fashion, thanks in part to its dependence on e-commerce, responds to trends and demand in real-time. Thus, production happens more on-demand than fast fashion, resulting in less overproduction at the cost of accelerated production, while still maintaining the cheap, not-meant-to-last quality level of fast fashion that ensures more consumption will be necessary not too far down the line (Camargo et al., 2020). Aided by its relationship to e-commerce, ultra-fast fashion relies heavily on marketing through social media influencers to reach its adolescent audience (Camargo et al., 2020, p. 546). The online nature of ultra-fast fashion — which is increasingly built into the design of social media applications (such as the recently launched "TikTok Shop") — paired with how social media has long been used by the fashion industry to target adolescents (Cassidy & van Shijndel, 2011) who are prone to overconsume in an endless pursuit of identity as expressed through dress (McNeill & Venter, 2019, p. 368) situates it as a social and environmental danger at the heart of this research, which seeks to better understand identity formation through fashion within the social media ecosystem of TikTok.

Within public discourse, sustainability consciousness has nonetheless increased and evolved. In a longitudinal analysis of YouTube fashion haul comments from 2011 to 2021, it was found that the criticisms levied in the comments evolved over time from criticisms of the individual in the video into criticisms of the practices of the fashion industry. Additionally, following the Rana Plaza collapse, there has been an upward trend in consciousness of the social harms of fast fashion (Haines et al., 2023). By and large, it is agreed upon that consumer fashion-consciousness has risen within the last decade (Camargo et al., 2020; Haines et al., 2023).

For all the talk and fashion-consciousness, action has been harder to come by. One response to fashion-consciousness has been the use of collaborative consumption practices — renting, borrowing, swapping, and purchasing second-hand — in an attempt to reduce individual consumption and prolong the life cycle of articles of clothing (McNeill & Venter, 2019). But by and large, while some fast fashion brands and retailers like Forever 21 have struggled in a period of growing fashion-consciousness (Haines et al., 2023), this is not necessarily linked with fashion-consciousness, and may even be instead attributable to ultra-fast fashion's rise (Camargo et al., 2020). There is speculation of an "attitude-behavior gap" surrounding fashion-consciousness, with "ethical hardliners" remaining a niche despite growing consciousness (Niinimäki, 2010; Park & Lin, 2020). This attitude-behavior gap is believed to have endured for a number of reasons such as cost, but is also in part believed to exist because the aesthetic value of clothing is important to consumers, and (ultra-)fast fashion provides consumers with the widest variety at the lowest price in the shortest amount of time (Niinimäki, 2010).

Summary

To review, it has been long understood that fashion is one of the key ways in which social identity is explored, formed, communicated, and practiced. The internet has emerged as a platform in which identity play is made uniquely possible and available, and has been used by fashion brands, designers, and influencers to reach adolescent audiences in a central moment of identity development. TikTok, having shaken up the social media landscape, has functioned as an expansion upon the modes of identity play previously best illustrated in the blogosphere and other social media. But the social media marketing of fashion content to an audience eager to purchase their next identity is not without its harm, as the fast fashion industry has greatly accelerated and evolved, in part due to social media's ability to communicate trends faster and reach audiences more directly. Overall, there remains much research to be done about TikTok's specific role within the ever-evolving social media ecosystem it has risen to the top of, as well as how the fashion practices it engenders can have damaging global effects on both people and the environment.

Chapter 3: Critical Theory and the Culture Industry in TikTok's Influencer

Ecosystem

Description of Theory

"Man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions —

eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.;

and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an

animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal."

(Marx, 1844)

The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory sought to implement Marxism into a

social and philosophical school of thought that, more than simply understanding reality,

provided an understanding that could inform substantive change. Theodor W. Adorno and

Max Horkheimer, two of the Frankfurt School's founding theorists, collaborated on

Dialectic of Enlightenment (originally published in 1947), coining the term of the

"culture industry" to describe how media — specifically Hollywood film — production

has been made into an industry, with mass production strategies standardizing the process

to the point of homogeneity in every cultural product. This mode of media production

stands in contrast to artisanship, where goods are made uniquely through visibly human

processes at the cost of decreased efficiency. Drawing parallels to car manufacturing,

they explain "The advantages and disadvantages [of Chrysler and General Motors]

debated by enthusiasts serve only to perpetuate the appearance of competition and choice.

It is no different with the offerings of Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer"

(Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 97). The function of the development of the culture

industry is multifaceted and ultimately is intended to explain the perceived absence of the

revolutionary social change forecasted by Marx nearly 100 years prior. The consistent

flow of manufactured cultural products serves to cater to desires for revolution, giving

consumers an outlet to feel as though they are participating in revolution while also

ensuring they need never go so far as to take revolutionary action.

   Serving to commodify culture as it encompasses both media, entertainment, and

the human experiences contained within them, the function of the culture industry as it is

enacted through various media channels (namely radio, television, and film) is twofold.

For one, the standardization of both production processes and the commodification of its

consumers lie at the heart of the culture industry, as "art now dutifully admits to being a

commodity, abjures its autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumer goods"

while at the same time, consumers are categorized and sold as commodities to advertisers

(Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 127, p. 97). Standardization is maintained through

superficial differentiation wherein "Something is provided for everyone so that no one

can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated" (Horkheimer & Adorno,

2002, p. 97). At the same time, the culture industry serves to pacify mass audiences who

"Capitalist production hems… in so tightly, in body and soul, that they unresistingly

succumb to whatever is proffered to them…the defrauded masses today cling to the myth

of success still more ardently than the successful" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, 106).

Through mass culture, art as a commodity functions as a form of psychosocial control,

dictating tastes, opinions, and "withering…imagination and spontaneity in the consumer

of culture today," ultimately promoting practices like relentless consumerism, and myths

like the American Dream and a classless society while simultaneously depriving artists of

their aspirations as art is no longer made for art's sake, but for profit (Horkheimer &

Adorno, 2002, p. 100). In this sense, the culture industry is used to maintain the status quo, with pop culture production standardized in the hands of a few while everyone else only shares the consumption which ultimately serves to fulfill their desire for spontaneity and revolution without ever needing to act on it. Under the premise that only connection with something truly human could inspire revolutionary action, the purpose of the culture industry is to uproot the practice of consumption from the realities of everyday life, using media to reinforce the status quo.

Application to TikTok's Influencer Ecosystem

Eighty years later, the culture industry is most commonly viewed as dominated by a handful of conglomerates — namely AT&T, Disney, Comcast, Viacom, and Fox — that altogether own essentially all of pop culture production. Thus, the emergence of social media as a democratized cultural space would, at the surface, seem to negate the cultural dominance imposed by the culture industry. Bestowing all with the same ability to create and share content, whether on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, or elsewhere functions to de-standardize the means of cultural production once assumed by the culture industry. Particularly on TikTok where, as will be discussed, the content consumed comes primarily from individuals rather than brands, the natural conclusion is that this democratization stands in opposition to a mass-produced culture. Ultimately, however, there exists a hierarchy built around "influencers" (or "creators," "Internet celebrities," "micro-celebrities," among monikers) backed by "large, for-profit corporations that sell and profit from commodities such as music, sports events, advertisements, and fashion… invest[ing] capital into the online presences of particular artists and brands in order to accumulate capital online and offline" which serves to create a similarly corporatized

environment on social media (Fuchs, 2021, p. 176). The capitalist business of influencers

upheld by "the capitalist operations of talent agencies, media companies, venture

capitalists, and advertisers" is masked by the promotion of the same myths engendered by

the culture industry — namely that of the American Dream and a classless society

(Fuchs, 2021, p. 175). As influencer capitalism "takes on the aura of democracy by

communicating through social media influencers the false claim that everyone can

become famous in influencer capitalism and that capitalism is an egalitarian world," the

aspirational labor encouraged by the influencer elite and taken up by proletarian

influencers is characteristic of this system's self-maintenance, all the while the means of

cultural production remain in the hands of the wealthy few in a system that appears to be

far more different from Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry than it actually is

(Fuchs, 2021, p. 189).

Meanwhile, consumers (followers) perform visibility labor as they engage with

the content they consume, often either because of aspirations to become influencers or a

desire for recognition from those they watch. In doing so, consumers' attention becomes

a commodity sold to advertisers while consumers themselves continue to support

influencers and the brands that support them by purchasing merchandise. The content and

brand identity of the influencer, on the other hand, is not itself a commodity but rather

serves to attract the necessary audience from which they can profit (Fuchs, 2021).

Influencer-Led Culture Industry and Identity Formation through TikTok Fashion

Content

The culture industry, as it exists on social media, is of particular relevance to

adolescents and young adults as they are one of the largest and most accessible

demographic groups on social media platforms and they are among the most interested in

celebrities and celebrity culture (including influencer culture) in this process (Fuchs,

2021, p. 190). In the most critical years of identity formation, impressionable young

adults tend to be heavy social media users invested in celebrity culture, making them

prime targets for influencer marketing. With many teens having their appearances

influenced by those of celebrities to the point of rampant insecurity, "the culture

industry's branded content enforces beauty ideals on social media that can make young

people feel insecure about their appearance" (Fuchs, 2021, p. 190). Particularly in the

fashion industry, known for its ruthlessness in dictating and upholding beauty standards,

the influence of the culture industry's branded content is felt strongly and is ultimately

effective at driving purchase intentions (Fuchs, 2021, p. 191).

Altogether, while this research aims to look specifically at the experience of social

media consumers, rather than that of influencers, the dynamics that exist on any social

media platform are imposed by its influencers who, as discussed, are entwined within the

culture industry's social media manifestation. For young adults — the age group of focus

in this research — social media's influencer ecosystem serves as one of the primary ways

in which culture is experienced and identity is constructed. In the age of big data, now

more than ever consumers are segmented into groups and commodified for advertisers at

unprecedented levels — a phenomenon known to be well-illustrated by TikTok's

algorithm, around which the app's entire user interface is constructed. With influencer

capitalism's emergence making "the boundaries between advertisements, news content,

and editorial content…become so fluid that it is often hard for audiences to distinguish

what is and what is not an advertisement whose primary aim is to make them buy

something," it "advances a positivist logic that focuses on happiness and promotes

consumption as the solution to unhappiness" (Fuchs, 2021, p. 196-7). As will be

discussed, the blurring of boundaries between advertisements, news, and editorial content

has not gone unnoticed by participants, and influencer-driven consumerism exists in

abundance in the world of TikTok fashion content.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research was conducted in the form of a series of surveys about fashion content on TikTok followed by focus group sessions. After nine surveys spaced out over the course of three weeks (three per week), focus group sessions took place on the fourth and final week of the study. The survey was designed with a pool of roughly 20 participants (of equal gender identity distribution) in mind. The decision to survey others (as opposed to other commonly used methods for social media research, namely content analysis) was made in an effort to account for the highly personalized nature of TikTok's algorithm and gather a broader range of user experiences on the platform. As discussed in the literature review, TikTok's content personalization technology has created highly individualized user experiences that have been referred to as the various "sides" of the app (Abidin, 2020). With this in mind, a content analysis would struggle to encapsulate the depth and breadth of TikTok content. Thus, the decision to conduct a survey of a pool of participants was made with the goal of covering more of the breadth of TikTok content, while the decision to have participants complete multiple surveys ensured that the depth of the various "sides" of TikTok was still explored.

Participants were all current undergraduate students at Boston College recruited by convenience and snowball sampling via emails, word of mouth, and a handful of Boston College professors publicizing the study to their students. One of the primary obstacles in recruitment was a sizable subset of students who have made an active choice to either delete/never download TikTok out of concern born from the app's reputation for being particularly addictive and effective within the evolving internet "attention economy" (Abidin, 2020; Goldhaber, 1997). It is worth noting that all of the students who

expressed interest but were ultimately unable to participate since they did not have

TikTok said that they used Instagram's relatively new "Reels" feed which heavily mirrors

TikTok's user-interface and style of content. For the sake of consistency in focusing

strictly on TikTok as a platform, they were not permitted to participate in the study.

Ultimately, 12 undergraduates signed up to participate in the study (5 men and 7 women).

Among the participants, one was a freshman, one was a sophomore, four were juniors,

and the remaining six were seniors.

   The survey was designed to be completed quickly and easily since participants

would need to complete it several times. Participants were asked to browse TikTok in

whatever manner they typically would at their leisure for 15 minutes and complete a

5-minute survey at the end of each 15-minute session. All surveys contained the same

questions, with the exception of the first survey, which had an additional section at the

start to only be completed once. This one-time section sought to gauge a general sense of

TikTok usage among participants, acquiring essential contextualizing data such as their

recorded screen time on TikTok, whether or not they post on the app or strictly consume

content, as well as an open-ended question where they were invited to describe their

personal style of fashion.

   The remainder of the first survey and all of the subsequent surveys asked the same

questions. Starting with a sliding scale to indicate what percentage of content they

considered to be fashion-related, the subsequent questions sought to categorize the

fashion-related content they encountered. Some of these content categorizations were

whether or not the videos were posted by individuals versus brands, accounts they

already followed versus those they did not, and the "genre" of fashion content: "outfit of

the day" (OOTD), "get ready with me" (GRWM), ads, shopping hauls, and an "other" category. They were also surveyed on which specific products (shirts, pants, jewelry, sweaters, bags, shoes, etc.) they saw and the price ranges of these products (ranging from "$ = Inexpensive" to "$$$$ = Very Expensive"). They were asked to recall any specific brands or trends that stuck with them. Finally, they were asked about the extent to which they felt that the products shown accurately reflected their personal sense of style and their intent to purchase any of the items they saw.

The focus group was designed around a series of guiding questions that served to help participants reflect on the survey process as it pertains to their own sense of style and identity. They were invited to share anything they found surprising, the recurring trends and brands they saw, and if the process as a whole made them more cognizant of their own identities and self-presentation. They were asked about how well they felt the fashion content aligned with their identities, as well as any aspirational identity they may have. Finally, they were asked for general thoughts on style, identity, and trends in relation to TikTok as a whole.

Surveys were completed through Qualtrics, with participants receiving reminder emails with the survey link every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday for three weeks. During the last week, participants were invited to sign up for focus group sessions which occurred the following week. Focus groups were recorded with consent from the participants and transcribed, before being stored as text files with their corresponding recordings deleted.

The first survey was sent on September 18, and the final survey was sent on October 6. The final response was collected on October 18, the date of the last focus

group (by one of that group's participants). The survey was then closed and data collection was completed. In the end, 84 survey responses were recorded of the possible 108 (12 participants completing 9 surveys each). It is worth noting that Participant 2 did not complete any surveys and was unable to attend any focus group sessions. So while 12 people agreed to participate, there were functionally only 11 participants. When excluding this outlier, the survey completion rate was 85% (84/99 possible surveys), with each of the 11 participants completing an average of 7.63 surveys each. As no questions were specifically required, the amount of responses for any given question ranges from 76 to 80. One focus group had to be rescheduled for the week after, and Participant 9 could not attend any of the initial sessions or the rescheduled one, meaning only 10 participants (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12) were present across the three focus group sessions.

Ultimately, the survey was designed to gauge a sense of the participants' impressions of fashion content on TikTok, rather than any actual metadata. The focus groups served to reinforce this, looking at lasting impressions from the survey process the week after they had been completed. By looking at a wide variety of user experiences, the study as a whole was designed to mix quantitative and qualitative data as it sought to gauge qualitative user experiences and impressions. While limited in scope both in regards to sample size and demographic, the qualitative bend to the survey-heavy study sought to better understand the smaller picture of these 11 participants' TikTok experiences rather than attempt to make big-picture generalizations about the platform and the experiences of its one billion users.

Chapter 5: Analysis & Interpretation

Participant Profile

Ten participants (all except Participant 2 and Participant 4) completed the first survey's additional section designed to gauge each of their TikTok use habits and personal senses of style. All participants reported having spent between three and seven days per week on TikTok. Only Participant 1 used it just three times per week, Participant 9 used it four, and Participant 3 used it five. The rest all used it seven days per week, making an average of 6.1 days/week in the participant body. All participants indicated that they use TikTok to consume, rather than create content, with six responding "consume" and four responding "mostly consume" on a scale that ranged from "consume" to "post."

Participants reported a breadth of individual styles, with some noteworthy commonalities. In an open-response field, three participants (6, 11, and 12) used the word "granola" in describing their styles, while two of the same participants (6 and 12) and a different third participant (10) also used the word "outdoorsy." "Grandma" came up twice, too — with Participant 3 using it in the context of describing floral patterns she likes to wear as "often deemed either cottagecore or grandmacore" and Participant 12 in describing her style as "Coastal grandma."

Beyond specific words, one common theme was participants who felt their styles were more casual or laid-back, emphasizing comfort while still being attentive to how they dress (Participants 6, 10, 11, 12). Another was participants who felt they dressed pretty simple or "basic," dressing nicely and thoughtfully but not particularly interested in dramatically reinventing themselves through bold fashion choices (Participants 1, 5,

and 7). Most participants — whether in the surveys or focus groups — mentioned thrifting as the way they came across much of their wardrobe (Participants 3, 5, 10, and 11). With the exception of Participant 9, the group of participants as a whole stood in contrast to the stereotypical default college student uniform of shorts/sweatpants and a t-shirt/hoodie. While far from fashion influencers themselves, there was a general attentiveness to one's fashionable identity within the participant body that is likely not representative of college (or even BC) students at large.

Participants were suggested to use TikTok for roughly 15 minutes before completing each survey. Asked to indicate their session duration in each response, 79 responses had an average duration of 21 minutes and 52 seconds, with sessions ranging from 10 minutes to an hour. In each survey, participants were also asked to recall and estimate the percentage of fashion-related content they saw in their last TikTok browsing session. The average was 25.41%, with 77 responses ranging from 0% to as high as 80%.

In line with TikTok's innovative For You Page-driven design that rejects the once-prevailing social media tenet that users should see content from people they know, rather than those they do not "Follow," a majority of responses — 51% (41/80) — strongly disagreed with the statement "The fashion-related content on my For You Page is coming from users/brands that I already follow." Altogether, 71% (57/80) either somewhat or strongly disagreed, while none strongly agreed (20% (16/80) somewhat agreed, with the rest in the middle). Along the same lines, 55% (44/80) of responses reported seeing a higher volume of fashion content from individuals than from brands, while only 30% (24/80) reported a greater brand presence. Only 6% (5/80) of responses reported their respective sessions' fashion content as being fully brand-centric. All in all,

the fashion content reported was consistent with research and conventional wisdom around TikTok's algorithm, as individuals that users were not previously following led the pack, rather than accounts users were previously following or brands.

   Asked to rank the various styles of fashion-related content they saw — broken into five categories: "outfit of the day" videos (OOTDs), "get ready with me" videos (GRWMs), ads, hauls, and "other" — ads was ranked the most frequent in 49% (37/76) of responses, being ranked first 20 more times than the second most frequent type of fashion content (OOTDs, ranked first 22% of the time (17/76 responses)). The most common response input in the "other" category were "fit inspiration" style videos, where the person in the video is not "getting ready" or necessarily displaying their own outfits, but rather communicating various outfit ideas verbally and/or visually to spark their viewers in crafting similar outfits of their own, almost as a sort of fashion advice blog.

Figure 1

Styles of Fashion-Related Content, Ranked Most-Least Frequent
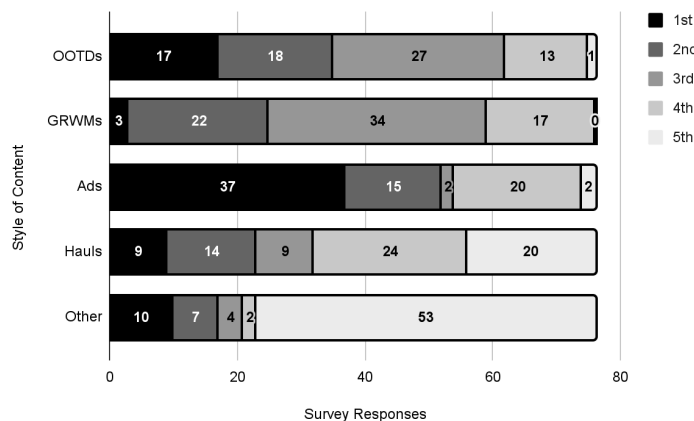
Each of the five most common styles of fashion-related content with bars divided into five segments, each one representing how often they were ranked 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th in frequency across 76 surveys from 11 participants.

Ultimately, each "genre" of video was given a score that averages the ranks they were given (from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most frequent and 5 the least). By this metric, ads had the lowest score with 2.14, followed not-so-closely by OOTDs with 2.51 and GRWMs with 2.86 before two large gaps that separated the top three from hauls (3.42) and all other categories from "other" (4.07), which ranked last in 70% (53/76) of responses, indicating that the vast majority of TikTok's fashion-related content is contained within the other four categories (particularly the top three). Further distinguishing ads, OOTDs, and GRWMs from the rest is the fact that ads were only ranked last on two occasions, OOTDs once, and GRWMs never.

Data was collected on the products that were shown across the range of fashion-related content, but while shirts and sweaters had a slight edge on other products, the distribution was fairly balanced, indicating no significant tendency towards any fashion product(s) over others. The items shown also trended cheaper, with 83% (65/78) plotting the items they saw as either "$ - Inexpensive" or "$$ - Moderately Expensive" on a scale that went up to "$$$$ - Very Expensive" (which was only answered once).

Asked to input any trends and brands they recalled seeing into an open-response field, many responses mentioned fall/winter clothing as a prevailing theme in the content they saw, including but not limited to sweaters, quarter-zip jackets, and boots, while others mentioned a lot of Halloween content, ranging from costume inspiration/guides to Halloween-themed articles of clothing, namely a recurring pair of Halloween pajama pants. This seasonal influence was reiterated in each of the focus group sessions, with some participants mentioning seeing TikTok Shop ads for "the perfect fall bag" (Participant 11) or a "new fall line [that] just dropped" (Participants 4 and 7) while

another mentioned seeing a lot of "fall outfit inspiration" videos (Participant 6), centered around fall items and color palettes.

The responses regarding trends and brands pair well with the participants' self-described fashion senses: Participant 1, the only one who expressed any interest in designer products, noted seeing Hermès Birkin bags and Coach purses; Participant 3, who was interested in crocheting and said others would describe some parts of her fashion sense as "grandmacore" mentioned seeing granny square cardigans; Participant 9, who dressed mostly in athleisure, reported seeing more athleisure on his feed. By and large, the trends and brands participants recalled on the surveys reflected — at least to some extent — many of the key aspects of their self-described fashion senses. Befitting this apparent algorithmic accuracy, the majority (54%, 43/80) of responses indicated that what they saw generally reflected their current sense of style while only 28% (22/80) felt it did not, with the rest in the middle. Reminiscent of the notion that "differences are hammered home and propagated," Participant 6 stated in his focus group session "Unfortunately… they know me" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 97).

Finally, participants' purchase intention for the products they saw skewed towards a slight increase. With 48% (38/80) reporting unchanged purchase intentions and only 4% (3/80) and 2.5% (2/80) reporting "strongly decreased" and "strongly increased" purchasing intentions, respectively, participants did not feel a strong shift towards or against purchasing in most cases. Noteworthy, however, is that only 15% (12/80) reported "decreased" purchasing intentions while 31% (25/80) responded that purchasing intentions had "increased." This suggests that despite how inundated with ads the participants felt (as will be discussed shortly), fashion-related content is still generally

successful at increasing purchasing intentions among users, despite the fact that many participants (as will also be discussed shortly) felt they were particularly cognizant of the fact they were being marketed to through their participation in this research study. Given this effectiveness despite participants' awareness, one can only imagine that this content may be proven even more successful at driving up purchase intentions among the general public.

TikTok Consumption Habits

Generally speaking, participants reported that the exercise of filling out surveys after spending time on TikTok led them to be far more aware of the content they were seeing and subsequently just how *unaware* they typically are when using TikTok. Participant 1 felt as though "any like scrolling platform, it's so easy to just not really process anything you're getting" and Participant 4 described the experience of watching short-form content as "I'll be, like, on my phone, like… 'Oh, I'm watching slop. This is absolutely nothing.'" Asked what she learned in the survey process, Participant 11 remarked "[That] I don't pay attention that much when I'm watching TikToks. Like, I'm not paying attention to like, the ads I get" with Participant 6 relating, saying "I usually just swipe right past [ads], but like this made me actually pause and like, I was like, 'Wait, I'm getting advertised [to] right now.' …I realized I didn't do that beforehand." Participant 7, in the rescheduled focus group that took place a week after the others and two weeks after the last survey was sent out, noted

> Now that I've stopped doing the surveys and kind of, like, being aware of it, like, I couldn't tell you if I've seen these ads again now, like, like, genuinely, I'm like, I realized how when you're not aware of it, you can just kinda, it goes straight over your head, you consume it, and that is what it is.

Even with increased attentiveness in the survey process, some participants still felt it was difficult to recall what they had seen, with Participant 8 explaining, "I like, mindlessly scroll and…then…going back and doing the survey. I'm like, 'Do I even remember anything that I looked at?' I was like, 'Geez, that's terrible. I just spent 20 minutes and I like, I had no brain stimulation at all.'" Overall, participants reported an increased awareness of their TikTok habits, whether this awareness translated into them actually remembering what they had seen or not. This finding is consistent with the academic consensus about social media — but specifically TikTok and its drop feeder-like user interface and design — as it pertains to imbuing passivity in users who remain sucked in despite potentially frequent unsatisfactory and unfulfilling experiences on the platform (Lupinacci, 2021; Postman, 1986).

The experience of participating made participants aware of more than just their social media habits, as other common threads of the focus groups were increased awareness of both the speed of the fashion cycle and some common fashion content marketing strategies. Talking about how she got most of her clothes thrifting, Participant 3 said that she realized "Things come and go really fast, like everybody suddenly had one thing, and then everybody didn't have that thing, and then we were all just moving very, very fast…because I thrift like, I think I severely underestimated how fast trends change." Expanding upon this, Participant 10 added that the experience made her cognizant of microtrends for the first time, concluding that "I need to be like, conscious of, like, what I'm purchasing. Is this something I'm going to be, like, actually using, or is this just, like, a month-long trend that I'm not?"

Beyond this awareness of the fashion cycle, participants became privy to fashion marketing strategies, with a general appreciation for as well as an awareness of the fact that content made by/featuring individuals was more effective at marketing products to audiences than a more conventional commercial advertisement. Participant 7 reported that she noticed "the difference between brand content and individual content, how much more individual content I saw, but like how it was woven into the…brand but like it wasn't brand directly" and Participant 12 added that "I was more like, likely to keep watching if it was like an influencer or someone who was, like, doing a haul than I was if it was like an ad, I would like, swipe away pretty quickly, like, without realizing it."

Different focus groups honed in on different experiences with this phenomenon of covert advertising, but ultimately they all experienced and reflected on it in some capacity. Participant 10 told of an experience where she felt deceived, seeing a user wearing a piece of clothing that she liked and clicking on the profile hoping to find more information on it, only to be immediately redirected to another website, shattering the facade of authenticity and relating to this creator in realizing that the video itself was an ad. She was not alone in this experience of feeling deceived, as Participant 8 also experienced the same phenomenon, telling of a type of video where "you just see someone like, trying on a new jacket or something" before noticing a link to buy it or a "Sponsored" tag (Figure 2, indicating the video was a paid promotion or brand-affiliated) at the bottom. (There is also a specific icon that appears on videos that contain direct links to purchase promoted items for sale on the TikTok Shop (Figure 3). While not discussed by the participants, this is yet another way in which TikTok classifies sponsored content while keeping it within the stream of content on the FYP.)

Figure 2

TikTok's "Sponsored" Tag

The "Sponsored" tag (bottom left) on a Hollister ad.

Figure 3

TikTok's "Sponsored" Tag and TikTok Shop Integration

The "Sponsored" tag (bottom left) on an ad for a t-shirt of raccoons holding a can of Dr.

Pepper, sold through a shop called "RiveraAvilesStore" on the TikTok Shop. The video

features an orange shopping cart icon (above the account name and video caption),

shown on videos that contain direct links to products on the TikTok Shop.

Other groups discussed the "Sponsored" tag as well, with Participant 7 noting how small the icon is in the corner and how, at many points, she failed to notice it on sponsored videos (at least initially), especially since many of the videos it was on were, as previously discussed, disguised as authentic experiences of other individuals rather than overt expressions of brand affinity. On the topic of not noticing the tag, Participant 4 added that some videos that he felt warranted the tag were simply without it. The videos would not be labeled "Sponsored" but were a style of content that nonetheless *felt* promoted, with the users in the videos flashing new items in the camera while exclaiming phrases like "Check this out!" with a degree of excitement that no individual acting completely in their own self-interest would feel the need to reach. There was also evidence to suggest that a more covert advertising strategy where sponsored videos made by individuals are not even labeled as such may be more effective, as Participant 10 stated outright that the "Sponsored" tag made her more hesitant to look into the products it was attached to, again supporting the idea that an effective illusion of authenticity is at the heart of fashion marketing on TikTok. Instead, she and others (namely Participants 6 and 11, who all shared similar sentiments in their focus group) preferred to draw style inspiration from people with similar hobbies or a "vibe" they liked, where the creators they admired were not pushing a product but just happened to be wearing something cool or interesting. In these cases, they would go to the comments section looking for anyone who had already commented something to the effect of "Where'd you get that?" and received a reply. To this effect, Participant 11 said she found that when the person selling a product had an aesthetic she found appealing, she was most likely to actually purchase it.

Supporting the notion that (at least the impression of) authentic connection and

relation with the individuals in fashion content is most effective at holding users'

attention and fostering/maintaining a genuine interest in the products displayed,

Participant 1 (who it is worth noting, is pre-med) spoke of an influencer she related to

and whose content inspired her to make more conscious decisions about her own fashion

sense. A sort of medical student fashion influencer, her content focused on being in

medical school while also being "not like the typically dressed med student." Participant

1 talked about how this has motivated her to try and dress beyond the "med student

uniform" that she described as "functional" and categorized by scrubs, sweatpants, and

sweatshirts, now opting to spend "the five minutes I could, like, changing just like,

'Okay, put on, like, a sweater, do something different,' and it's small …you don't want to

waste time, but it isn't wasting time, because now I also feel more comfortable…" Along

the same lines, Participant 8 mentioned a lineup of influencers he followed whose styles

he admired and felt aligned with his. He even mentioned some confusion at not being

able to expand this lineup, struggling to find new influencers in this realm despite

frequently interacting with their content. Altogether, these two stories highlight the

pivotal role of (perceived) authentic connection with individual influencers. When it

comes to fashionable identity, users' most enjoyable and memorable experiences came

from people they related to who presented authentic images of themselves. Participant 10

summarized this feeling in saying that she was "more inspired by the [influencers] who

weren't like pushing it directly… those were also the same people that were like, doing

the same kind of hobbies and other things that I am already interested in" and that any

interest she ever had in adopting the styles of influencers came in these situations,

secondary to a shared interest or general relatability. While covert ads and sponsored

content were ubiquitous and more successful than those coming directly from brands, the

most significant and meaningful content in terms of shaping participants' identities came

when nothing was even being sold at all.

What's for Sale?

With ads being as prevalent in TikTok fashion content as they proved to be, it is also

worth discussing the handful of selling points that participants felt were most commonly

used, of which the most pertinent were the identities and appearances of the individuals

featured in them and the prices at which items were sold.

Who's Coolest?

Among them was the idea of coolness or encouraging the audience to want to be

like the influencer in the video, with Participant 6 feeling the messaging was as simple as

"if you don't buy this, you're not gonna be cool." In discussing how/if this exercise made

participants reflect on their own identities, Participant 4 mentioned

> I think when you're looking to buy a product, it's more like, you know, you're
>
> trying to become the product… you like, see the model, where you're like, "Wow,
>
> that person looks cool" …it's less like, "Oh, this is going to help me make
>
> myself…different."

Similar to this emphasis on influencers' individual "coolness" (and the users' ability to

acquire it by purchasing the advertised product) in fashion content, there was also

discussion in the focus groups about the types of bodies that tend to find success on

TikTok and how that underscores trends in fashion and beyond:

> I think [style] does have to deal with body image and how you look and how you
>
> present yourself, just like as a person… I think a lot of that is motivated by

TikTok. And just the way that TikTok is, it's like, the pretty people and whatever, and like, they're the most watched and the most listened to, and then we kind of follow from that. So I think that definitely just influences and motivates us to, to also kind of wear what they're wearing, or look [like] what they look like. And then I'd also say just how it encourages us to just like, buy more. Like buy more, and care about the quality less because everything that's advertised is so cheap. (Participant 8)

In that same vein, Participant 1 mentioned how one of the most common selling points for clothes on TikTok was "This item will make you look skinny." And with a lot of the women influencers she saw, "when I went onto their pages, like their body content wasn't awesome, and it just reminded me a lot of what like, the body expectations of BC [are] for women, because I feel like it's so specific and brutal of what you need to look like and how clothes are gonna look on you." While the subject of BC's hegemonic fashionable identity will be returned to, the relevance of influencers' bodies and the beauty standards upheld by TikTok as a platform (and social media at large) is essential. On a platform that takes pride in being so democratized, ripe with opportunity and the allure of celebrity for any and all who care to claim it, the idea that how one looks — irrespective of clothing — is specifically at play in fashion content speaks to broader discourse about social media and a boom in negative body image that, while slightly outside of the scope of this research, nonetheless remain in play while looking to understand fashion content on TikTok.

What's Cheapest?

But above any others, the most prevalent selling point by far was the price. Everyone had seen some sort of ads — whether for the TikTok Shop, SHEIN, Temu, or another site (though the first two were especially prevalent) — promoting the latest trends for unfathomably low prices. Often framed relative to other common cheap purchases people make, the ads would feature individuals (oftentimes far below the status and following at which point one would be considered an "influencer") showcasing items like a set of "Halloween pajamas that cost the [price] of a cup of coffee" (Participant 1). Opting not to focus on the items themselves, the videos tended to fixate on the (unbelievably low) price, with Participants 7 and 11 noting how it seemed everything was always on a flash sale and Participant 3 explaining that "Tiktok Shop prioritizes price, and then the SHEIN hauls, that was also about price too. I don't particularly think that anything there was appealing about, like the fashion or anything else, it was mostly price." Beyond simply boasting a low price point, one focus group discussed an iteration of this price-focused marketing strategy for knock-off versions of established brands, with the formula for them being

> "You bought this, let's say polo for like, $100, when you could buy it here for $20
> or $10" …[but] it's like a way different, like fabric and everything. But they're
> trying to say just, no one is gonna know. (Participant 1)

And while consumers — or at least the participants in this study — can understand the difference in quality between a $100 polo and a $20 or $10 one, they also understood that that was not necessarily enough to dissuade people from purchasing the cheaper knock-offs. Speaking about seeing that an item was unusually cheap, Participant 8 explained his thought process as follows: starting with "'Well, that's probably not the

same quality.' But then also you're thinking, like, 'If I spend $10 on it, it could last me, what, I don't know, however long, and it'll look good, and no one will notice, maybe." In a social media-driven ultra-fast fashion industry where trends and microtrends come and go faster and faster, quality naturally falls to the side. Why invest in a piece of clothing that will last you for years when it will only ever be in style for months, if even? It is this rationale that underscores "Halloween pajamas for the price of a cup of coffee" ads: who cares how short-lived the item itself will be when it is so cheap and will supply an immediate (even if fleeting) dopamine rush right now? Participant 1 contrasted the price-focused fashion ads on TikTok with infamous beer advertisements where "somebody opens a beer and then, like, there's like six girls around him," saying that on TikTok "it just seems like they're presenting the item and the price, there's no actual story with it… There's no advertising to experiences…"

Standing above all others, the most dominant theme in fashion ads was thus the price of the products, followed by the idea that purchasing would help make one more like the individual selling the products in the first place, whether in terms of coolness, body image, or both. In any case, quality was never the focal point and was even often neglected in order to emphasize the price, which is consistent with the research and conventional wisdom around (ultra-)fast fashion as a hyper-acceleration of the fashion cycle predicated on social media marketing to adolescent audiences (Camargo et al., 2020; Cassidy & van Shijndel, 2011). Altogether, there is evidence to support that TikTok's fashion content (as with essentially any other media) promotes and is promoted by attractive people and preys on others' aspirations to be more like them. Paired with the unfathomably low price for one to buy into this lifestyle and become more like the

attractive (and typically also wealthy and white) influencers in question, ultra-fast fashion

ads on TikTok pose a deadly combination that feeds on people's most fundamental desire

of belonging at the most accessible prices possible, driving consumption of the cheapest

products to the highest volumes imaginable.

What's Left?

Two other less prevalent selling points that were mentioned (though significantly

less often) were the items' novelty and the sheer volume of ads for the same items.

Novelty relates to the previously mentioned speed of the (ultra-)fast fashion cycle, with

Participant 7 mentioning a connection being drawn between an item being new and being

desirable as if the two were inherently bound together, with the guiding philosophy being

that what is new should thus be desired by all. Fitting of the language often used on

TikTok to describe aesthetics by adding "-core" as a modifier (e.g. "grandmacore," as

mentioned in the methods chapter), Participant 10 called this connection between novelty

and assumed desirability "consumer-core."

In some contrast to this novelty that helped promote the latest styles and trends,

Participant 7 spoke on the frequency of ads and recalled feeling worn down by the same

ad for the same sweatshirts, saying "By the end, I was like, 'Okay, maybe they're kind of

cute.' …after I saw it like 20 times it was like, rather than scrolling past, it was kind of

like, 'Okay, fine. I'll look at the content.'" On a short-form video platform where users

consume a massive volume of content, potentially only lingering on videos for just a few

seconds each, it is reasonable to assume that one will encounter more ads than on other

video platforms (i.e. YouTube). So when encountering so many highly personalized ads

integrated into one's feed and, as previously discussed, disguised as standard fare, it is

understandable that the same ones are likely to repeat and that this repetition may be a genuine marketing strategy, prone to either cause frustration or wear the consumer down until they give in (or potentially even both), with the latter happening in this case to Participant 7 (who, it is worth noting, did not purchase the product, but nonetheless had become more endeared to it).

Implications of Ultra-Fast Fashion Marketing on TikTok

With remarkably low prices being the dominant throughline of most of the apparel advertised on TikTok — whether it was sold within the app itself via the TikTok Shop, TikTok's fully integrated e-commerce platform, or on third-party sites that advertised heavily on TikTok, such as SHEIN — it is worth further discussing how these sites/platforms, their products, and their relationship to TikTok's user interface serve as the latest manifestation of the increasingly fast ultra-fast fashion industry. It is a secret to no one, least of all the participants in this study, that the quality of items on sites like the TikTok Shop and SHEIN is pretty directly correlated with the price, with both being flooded with cheap items that are low in quality but look to compensate for their lack of quality with their perceived cultural relevance. To continue a particularly well-put, previously referenced (pages 54-55, regarding body image) quote from Participant 8:

> [TikTok influencers being conventionally attractive] definitely just influences and
> motivates us to, to also kind of wear what they're wearing, or look [like] what
> they look like. And then I'd also say just how it encourages us to just like, buy
> more. Like buy more, and care about the quality less because everything that's
> advertised is so cheap. And like people just… no one really cares or like makes
> good quality clothes anymore because of it, because we're so like, fast-paced…

and trends are so plastic that it's like nothing, nothing will ever stay super long.

So it's like, just buy the $10 shirt or the $10 pair of pants that'll make you look

cool for three months, and then once those are out of style, once [whoever] stops

wearing them, then you just move on to the next one. So I think it just accelerates

things, it makes things quicker, and it influences us more as to what we are, what

we wear.

The power of combining an industry-leading social media platform like TikTok with a

fully integrated e-commerce platform is obvious. Rather than solely profiting from selling

advertising space on TikTok, the integrated nature of TikTok Shop enables TikTok to

profit off of its own advertising space which is already desirable enough to attract so

many other advertisers. Combining this with the highly profitable, large-scale operation

of an (ultra-)fast fashion retailer with a business model much like that of SHEIN that

values low prices and equally low quality under the assumption that the trends will move

quickly enough that the low quality will not matter, the TikTok Shop's integration of the

low prices innate to the ultra-fast fashion business model into its short-form style social

media platform results in impulse purchasing to the highest degree. Tying cheap products

that offer TikTok's users a sense of belonging and being more like the influencers selling

them into a platform that never wants its users to dwell on anything too long becomes a

surefire way to make the ads most effective, to say nothing of how TikTok's highly

personalized algorithm also functions to make its fashion ads specifically targeted to the

interests and styles of each of its users, meeting them as close to where they are as

possible. The end result is a harmoniously symbiotic system that encourages cheap

impulse purchases on a platform that, by design, never wants its users to dwell on anything too long.

With this business model being as lucrative as it is for TikTok (and SHEIN, among others, with the exception of the direct integration exclusive to TikTok Shop), the end result for people conscious of the inner workings of the fashion cycle is Participant 8's frustration, feeling stuck because "either you spend a good amount of money on a nice product or you just don't, and so most of the time, as like a 21-year-old college student… I'm not willing to spend that money. And so… I just feel stuck." Participant 1 felt similarly, saying

> I'd rather get more expensive items and then have them for years on end. But that's not what sells on TikTok because you're not going to go on TikTok Shop and get a like, $120 pair of pants. You're going to like, actually, like, search it somewhere else, and do your research for that. So… I just didn't feel like I really had power. I felt like I was being told to like a certain thing and, like, yeah, I liked it because I was seeing all of these, like, pretty people wearing them, or, like, cool people or whatever.

With seemingly no (affordable) alternative, the temptation to comply with ultra-fast fashion despite understanding its ephemerality endures because participating is, at least on the surface, so cheap, to say nothing of the sense of belonging it can bring (or at least promises to). Of course, repeatedly making even these cheap purchases adds up over time, likely to wind up no cheaper than investing in higher quality, more durable items when all is said and done. But if one is enamored (or even simply content) with the smaller price tag in the moment, they are likely to find themselves subconsciously turning

their wardrobe into a subscription, constantly paying installments not even necessarily to be "in" on the latest trends, but simply to replace items that were never designed to last much longer than the trends they each promote.

Compounding the more frequent consumption innate to the business model of ultra-fast fashion brands like SHEIN is the manner in which they are promoted — as hauls. Haul videos exist in somewhat nebulous space between sponsored and unsponsored content, as was discussed in one focus group where Participants 4, 7, and 12 all agreed they felt like haul videos were particularly effective at functioning as covert advertising. With an influencer showing off their latest large purchase (haul), usually from one specific brand or retailer, the videos serve to promote the brand or retailer regardless of whether or not the influencer was either compensated or given the merchandise for free. Hauls were effective advertisements (in line with previously discussed findings that ads featuring individuals tended to be more effective than those that were obviously made by and only featured the brand itself), with Participant 12 noticing "I was more likely to keep watching if it was like an influencer or someone who was, like, doing a haul than I was if it was like an ad, I would like, swipe away pretty quickly without realizing it." Their effectiveness as ads aside, the prevalence of hauls as a genre of fashion content is particularly significant to the ultra-fast fashion cycle, as the speed at which trends move is tied to the speed at which influencers can create content. In order to have something to talk about, influencers need a constant influx of new trends. In order to sell new items, fashion brands need a constant influx of new videos from all the largest influencers promoting them. This symbiotic relationship between the two parties necessitates the acceleration of the fashion cycle on which ultra-fast fashion is founded,

resulting in even shorter lead times and responding to trends and demand in real-time thanks to its integration with e-commerce and direct-to-consumer infrastructure as in the cases of the TikTok Shop and SHEIN, among others.

Fashion hauls, as a practice, do far more than just aid in accelerating the fashion cycle as a genre of advertising on social media which thus increases the frequency at which people purchase clothes (given the accelerated trends and lower quality leading to a greater need to buy more often). As a pattern of consumption, fashion hauls also serve to increase the volume of fashion purchases, further fueling (over)-consumption as they normalize the practice of placing $100+ orders of cheap items that will neither remain in style nor good condition for months/years, necessitating another $100+ haul of the same brands down the line. As a practice, hauls are inherently more exclusive to the cheapest ultra-fast fashion brands — while someone will still make a designer brand haul as a display of status or wealth and people will still consume it, the accessibility that makes hauls of cheap items so alluring as an ad also makes it relatable and desirable to consume as a form of content.

Instagram Reels: Carbon Copy or Carbon Conscious?

One interesting dichotomy that kept arising throughout recruitment and research is that of Instagram Reels vs TikTok. Reels are a style of content and a tab of Instagram's feed introduced within the last few years that mimics the structure and short-form video format of TikTok's FYP, essentially looking to capture the essence of what makes TikTok unique and insert it within Instagram's larger structure. While the participants all used TikTok for the entirety of the surveys and focus groups, some participants naturally had experiences with Instagram Reels that they spoke about in the process of articulating their

thoughts about TikTok during focus groups. One notable difference was in marketing strategy, as Participant 6 contrasted fashion marketing on Reels with the TikTok Shop approach of pushing ridiculously low prices, explaining that "...the tactic [on Reels is] like, they just don't put the price at all. And then you click on it, and you're like, 'This is a $400 jacket' …So it does like the opposite [of TikTok], almost, but I think it gets you to click, that's like the biggest thing." Participant 11 spoke of how TikTok had recently begun queueing ads to play at the end of longer videos, and Participant 3 about how TikTok's ads are "very flashy," looking to immediately hook users as "the first few things that they say are very like, loud, like, 'Get ready with me!' or like, 'Don't walk, like, run!'" While Reels, on the other hand, still had ads woven into its stream, they were much less disguised as regular content, with Participant 6 feeling like "I don't think it was competing for my attention…I can just scroll past. It doesn't feel like it's like I have to watch it. And very few things I saw were like, individuals sponsored by a brand, at least, like, openly." While TikTok remains the object of focus in this study, Instagram Reels seems to raise a potential alternative model for fashion marketing — one worth further research and potentially more conducive to more sustainable, slow fashion brands than the ultra-fast fashion that seems to so naturally flourish on TikTok's algorithm.

Authenticity and Aspiration

In regards to their personal senses of style, the participants seemed generally content with where they were currently at and did not feel strongly that they were ever "dressing for a part" with one key exception, that being the expectations of what women at BC should wear, particularly to class. Reflecting on their personal senses of style,

many of the women in the focus groups (four of the six, Participants 1, 7, 10, and 12)

shared sentiments similar to Participant 10 in saying

> I also feel like going to BC though… I wonder, like, are there times when I
>
> choose outfits because I'm like, "Oh, this would match what I'm seeing"? Or
>
> when I'm like, "I can feel comfortable in this because other people would feel
>
> comfortable seeing me in this, like it's the norm."

By and large, these four women all felt strongly that there is a culture of dressing up in a

particular way for class and that culture does influence their fashion decisions, at least

when they are at BC, with Participant 12 saying "I'm wearing what I want, but… I am

dressing up for BC, like I would probably wear sweatpants a little bit more often if I

didn't go here." At the same time, Participant 12 felt empowered as she paid more

attention to TikTok fashion content, reporting the following, to the agreement of

Participant 7:

> I feel like especially at BC, a lot of people wear the same types of clothing, but
>
> they're not necessarily what's popular on TikTok or vice versa. And so like, if I
>
> hadn't been watching TikTok, maybe my style wouldn't have necessarily been
>
> seen at BC. But then watching TikTok, I was like, "Oh no, actually people do like
>
> this one thing that I wear because they think it's cool,' so then I was more
>
> confident to wear it, even at BC.

To this effect, Participant 1 spoke about the process of trying to unlearn feeling like she

needs to dress a certain way and trying to add some intentionality to her wardrobe

decisions (related to her med student influencer who similarly sought to promote putting

effort into one's style despite being preoccupied with med school). Outside of dressing up

for class, she expressed feeling restricted by the "Boston uniform," a term used among

young people to describe the typical "going out" outfit worn by young women in Boston,

generally consisting of "a black going out top with straight-legged jeans and white

sneakers with gold chunky small hoops and a gold necklace that five other people in the

bar have," per Participant 1, who also said of her own style

> I feel like I still will probably be wearing the Boston uniform out, like, at least
>
> every once in a while, but I'm trying to be just more unique with pieces and like,
>
> maybe it's not the whole outfit… and I may get a few, like, stares or whatever, but
>
> like, that's how I want to dress, and I'm getting there…it's a slow process of, like,
>
> intentionally putting things on for a reason, and not just, like, putting things on
>
> because that's how everyone's wearing it.

Altogether, four of the six women participating felt some degree of pressure

surrounding their fashion choices from their campus environment — more so than any

other source for any of the participants, who generally felt both as though they were free

to dress as they pleased and as though their current styles were fairly representative of

who they were.

On the subject of aspirational identities, one focus group shifted towards the

dominant ideas of how they felt they were supposed to dress in their careers. After

Participant 1, as previously mentioned, spoke about an influencer she admired who

inspired her in attempting to deviate from the perceived low-effort med student dress

code, Participant 8, studying to become a teacher, lamented what he felt was an

expanding dress code for teachers that he saw on TikTok. Either bordering on or crossing

the line of unprofessionalism, this repertoire included sweatpants, jeans, jorts, crop tops,

and leggings, much to the dismay of Participant 8 whose disapproval pushed him to begin

considering how he wishes to dress as he begins his own teaching career. In some slight

contrast with Participants 1 and 8 disapproving of the dominant styles of dress in their

forthcoming career paths, Participant 5, who is looking to enter corporate America after

graduation, said that TikTok videos like "a day in the life of corporate America" have

facilitated his process of assimilating into his aspirational corporate identity. While at

first he was not enthusiastic about the dress code awaiting him, he felt that the videos

helped him get a taste of what his future likely holds and has allowed him to ease into the

transition now. For Participant 5, TikTok had a similar function years prior, when he used

it as a high school senior to seek out college application tips and advice and ultimately

find answers to questions like "'What do college kids wear?'" and "'Should I buy a BC

sweatshirt when I got in?'"

In a similar vein, Participants 7 and 12 also reported "day in the life"-style content

helping them connect to their career aspirations, though with no mention of or connection

to these aspirations' modes of dress (instead with the content being informative about the

responsibilities and happenings of everyday life in the roles). Altogether, that makes five

of the ten focus group participants who, when prompted to discuss authenticity and

aspirational identity in relation to their senses of style, directed or participated in

conversation about their identities relative to their career choices and aspirations, defining

themselves by their (desired) occupations. While fashion as a means of identity

expression has preindustrial roots in being dictated by one's occupation, occupation is

generally considered to have diminished in its relevance from the more blatantly

highly-stratified societies of the past when performing social class through dress was a

part of the social order (Crane, 2000; Ewen, 1985). No longer the sole arbiter of one's

fashionable identity, one may expect a democratized fashion to have broadened the

horizons of the participants further to think of their identities beyond simply their

(desired) occupations, though five of ten participants tell a different story.

Other conversations on aspirational identity honed in on price as the key

limitation for several participants (3, 6, 8, 10, and 11 all mentioned it in some capacity).

For Participant 8, the biggest barriers were money and energy, and while he

acknowledged that he could work on the energy part, he still felt a sort of helplessness

about an aspirational identity that felt so out of reach. Similarly, Participant 11 vocalized

that "consistently seeing people with the aesthetic that you want, but like, can't achieve

[financially] is a little frustrating."

One of the most surprising findings with a potential relationship to achieving

aspirational identity was that four different participants across all three focus groups

shared a common experience: annoyance. Participant 6 said his "biggest takeaway" was

"that people that dress like me are very annoying… I found myself just getting very

annoyed by the content they were making, and it made me want to buy things much less."

Participant 3 shared a similar sentiment with her interest in crocheting, finding some

crocheting TikTok creators annoying, leading her to reflect and ask herself "'Oh, is that

me?'" In the same vein, Participant 8 spoke on the type of fashion influencers whose

style he admired, saying "I know if I saw [him] on the street with my friends, I would be

like, 'That's a cool outfit.' And then all my friends would be like, 'He looks like an

asshole.' And… well, I don't want to look like an asshole." Finally, Participant 4 spoke

about a J.Crew lookbook he saw on TikTok where a group of men were wearing ties to

class, saying "Oh, it looks cool, but I'm never gonna wear that… I'd be getting clowned on." While his comment also indicates some potential external pressures at play in his fashion choices, it continues the thread of participants lamenting people who, based on their styles and interests, *should* appeal to them. In TikTok's endeavor to put its users in hyper-specific boxes, and in creators' efforts to stand out, there may be a certain degree at which these creators/posts overdo it, leaning too hard into a certain look or aesthetic. In the eyes of these four participants who each, in some way and to some degree, held negative attitudes towards users/videos that one who knows their interests would expect them to like, there is a certain line that needs to be toed — not just by the creators of the videos, but also themselves. Participant 4 seemed to genuinely admire the styles of the J.Crew lookbook, and Participant 8 that of the influencers he followed, but both felt restricted to let it change how they dress because of how others would perceive them for it. And while Participant 6 felt he did nonetheless dress like the people he found annoying, and Participant 3 remained interested in crocheting, their frustrations were both significant enough to warrant mentioning, and in the case of Participant 6, the label of being his "biggest takeaway."

TikTok, Autonomy, and Creativity

Apart from fashion, TikTok served as an information source in a variety of ways for different participants. Participants 7 and 12 spoke about using it for Halloween costume inspiration similar to how people use Pinterest to make "boards" of fashion or other aesthetic inspiration. At the same time, they also felt like this practice deprived them of some of their own creativity and individuality as they deferred to influencers to

make decisions that are meant to be expressions of their own identity, with Participant 12 explaining:

> I think my use of TikTok has almost, like, decreased my creativity, because it's like, I can just look at what other people have done and replicate that… I personally, like, didn't have to think of any Halloween costumes, because I just went on TikTok… [And] I want new sneakers. I don't have to look on any websites. I could just go on TikTok, see what someone's wearing, and be like, "I like those," and do that myself. Just like, it's almost like, lazy…

Participant 7 spoke about trying to reinfuse her own creativity into this process that felt devoid of it, saying her reshaped approach was to look at the trends and ask "Well, everybody's gonna be this for Halloween, or everybody's gonna wear this…how do you make it creative or special or different?" But even then, one's own creativity and individuality are relegated to the backseat, with the foundation still being laid out by influencers who set the trends, whether for Halloween costumes or fashion senses at large.

TikTok has long been under fire in public discourse, seen as responsible for children's deteriorating attention spans (as Participant 10 said at one point, "my attention span is like, cooked now"). Participants seemed to echo this sentiment as they spoke about "mindlessly consuming" content "spoonfed" to them. Participants 3, 6, 10, and 11 all either spoke directly of or agreed with this phenomenon in their focus group session and Participant 1 also independently used the word "fed" to describe the process of consuming content on TikTok, similarly ascribing TikTok with the power in deciding what to consume, rather than herself as a user. In these cases, the algorithmically-based

user interface of TikTok is the culprit for a user experience that felt so tailored to users'

interests while simultaneously feeling so out of their control.

For all the information and content consumed on TikTok, attitudes surrounding

TikTok's algorithm varied, with Participant 11 saying she felt that she has "a little bit" of

power in building her algorithm, and Participant 4 mentioning that he found himself

interacting with fashion content more because he was doing the surveys and that he felt

he started seeing more when he did. Generally, these experiences speak to the notion that

TikTok's algorithm, as adept as it is at putting users in boxes, only does so based on the

interactions and engagements users make within the app: what videos one likes,

comments on, shares, or even simply how long one watches a video for are all taken into

consideration. At the same time, some participants also felt like the algorithm was not

responsive enough, and the burden of curating one's own experience fell on them.

Participant 7, explained how she felt "stuck" on certain "sides" of TikTok, tasked with the

labor of manually remaking her algorithm. While one "makes" their algorithm in the

traditional sense of it responding to their engagements, one also has to literally make their

algorithm to steer it on course. Participants 3 and 8 also voiced experiences along these

lines to different degrees. Participant 3 felt like TikTok had her in two ill-fitting boxes

that were also very different from one another aesthetically: crocheting and streetwear.

Participant 8 liked the box he was placed in for fashion content but felt like no matter

how much he engaged with certain creators he liked, his algorithm would never introduce

him to more, similar creators.

These frustrations are particularly relevant because of TikTok's design that

deemphasizes who users follow, instead pushing them to consume an endless stream of

content from whoever the app thinks they want to see. Because what users see is filtered through this algorithm, rather than simply being left to each user's discretion, TikTok's ability to serve as an outlet for self-expression is called into question by any and all hiccups in its algorithmic process. While TikTok remains fairly accurate (as previously mentioned, the majority — 54%, 43/80 — of responses indicated that what they saw generally reflected their current sense of style), for a platform whose reputation is founded on the proficiency of its algorithm as its primary intellectual asset, these anecdotes are telling of how TikTok can be potentially limited in its capacity to let users explore identity. Other platforms like Instagram or Facebook leave (or left, as TikTok's success has since pushed them to begin incorporating FYP-like elements into their feeds, now showing users more than just posts from users they follow or are friends with) content curation to up to their users, bestowing upon them much more power in feed curation which allows one's feed to more accurately operate as a reflection of one's own identity, aspirational or not. The relative loss of autonomy in determining what one consumes on social media is illustrative of how the algorithmically-driven FYP and the boxes it puts users in serve to ensure that "differences are hammered home and propagated," and is even reminiscent of efforts to use artificial intelligence to take human creativity out of media and the arts (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 97). Given the extent to which the media people consume is a key component of their identities, when what users consume is decided for them by a multibillion-dollar industry and the platforms that house it, the most fundamental aspects of personhood are constantly being dictated by bidding wars completely hidden from and unannounced to the masses most implicated by them.

Concluding Analysis

The concept of the culture industry as conceived by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in 1947 refers to how mass media production has become homogenized to the point where cultural products are treated as and turned into commodities, the production of which lacks any trace of human involvement as it has become so standardized in the course of mass production. With superficial differences offered in these cultural products, everyone's ranging interests are accounted for and encompassed within the culture industry's umbrella. The ultimate function of the culture industry is thus to profit off of the maintenance of the status quo, either by reinforcing it directly or by providing consumers with a contained and carefully constructed outlet for experiencing their rebellious feelings and ideas.

The culture industry of the 21st century has seemingly assumed the form of media conglomerates that control the vast majority of pop culture, namely television, film, and music, with social media as a democratized space offering an alternative as it seemingly offers an alternative realm in which any ordinary person can become a contributor to and member of pop cultural canon. The reality of social media, however, is not too different from that of media conglomerates, as the social media ecosystem is built around the capitalist business of influencers backed by the likes of talent agencies, media companies, venture capitalists, and advertisers. At the same time, influencer culture gives the facade of authenticity and accessibility to audiences through its use of individuals who serve as idols, becoming products in and of themselves in an attempt to attract large audiences, which are the real commodity being sold to advertisers and the like (Fuchs, 2021).

As two age groups known for tending to be terminally online, obsessed with celebrity culture, and fixated on their identities, adolescents and young adults both look to be some of the most affected by the culture industry as it operates in social media's influencer ecosystem, particularly as it relates to their own identities. With ultra-fast fashion and TikTok as the latest iterations in two of the domineering cultural industries, they are in a position of incredible global social relevance while also having yet to be the subject of much academic research. The purpose of this study is thus to break ground on the relationship between fashion and identity as it exists on TikTok. Through a series of nine longitudinal surveys over the course of three weeks and culminating in focus group sessions, eleven participants — all BC students ages 18-22 — looked at this relationship as it existed in their own highly personalized feeds and lives.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Background and Significance of the Study

Fashion is a complex practice. It has a rich history of being used both to uphold and subvert hierarchies based on socioeconomic status. Especially in highly-stratified pre-industrial societies, how one dressed was a reflection not just of socioeconomic status, but also of gender, occupation, and/or religion (Ewen, 1985). Thus, as a practice of performing one's social identity, it naturally progressed into an outlet for identity *negotiation* (Crane, 2000). Particularly with the birth of a global democratized consumer fashion in the 20th century, fashion has evolved fully into an outlet for exploring, forming, and practicing one's own constructed present or aspirational social identity, a practice particularly relevant to adolescents and young adults, who are developmentally situated to be more concerned with identity than other age groups.

With the internet's emergence as a social space, first with blogs and more recently with social media, elements of identity exploration, formation, and practice have begun to take place online — and increasingly so. This mediatized fashion has made it such that the very nature and characteristics of these online platforms serve to alter the dynamics of the fashion industry and its communication structure entirely (Kristensen & Christensen, 2017, p. 227). At the same time, the internet and the influencer culture it has birthed have intensified an obsession with one's own personal, projected identity, making individualistic performances of identity all the more prevalent in how people interact with one another and consume information on a regular basis.

As the latest evolution in the internet's social media sphere, TikTok's mold-breaking structure as an endless stream of content that de-emphasizes one's own

social circle makes for a unique (and evidently wildly successful) social media experience unlike any other, which also means that the experiences of identity exploration, formation, and practice through fashion on the app are themselves unique. A leader in the attention economy, TikTok's design philosophy based around an endless stream of content and short-form videos has proven to be both addictive and a cause for social concern, with fears that it is harmful to users' attention spans. In regards to fashion, little prior research has been conducted, but general research around the app has found "sides" of TikTok, rabbit holes that have the capacity to act as (sub)cultures with which users can interact in order to train the algorithm to keep them on a side they want to stay on. Additionally, TikTok's short-form nature emphasizes ephemerality in its content, which is particularly relevant to fashion content as it relates to the progression of similarly ephemeral trends in an increasingly fast fashion cycle.

Ultra-fast fashion has arisen in tandem with social media and the internet as the evolution of fast fashion, which prioritizes clothing items that are cheap in both price and quality in an effort to appeal to and dictate the latest trends. It stands in opposition to a slow fashion model, which looks to minimize consumption by encouraging its consumers to purchase fewer, higher-quality items at the cost of higher prices and less of a connection to the latest trends. Ultra-fast fashion, on the other hand, builds on fast fashion; with a dependence on e-commerce and marketing on social media (rather than physical media), ultra-fast fashion responds to trends and demand in real time.

Findings and Central Argument

Generally, the study had the effect of making participants more aware of both how fast the fashion cycle moves and how disengaged they typically are while scrolling on

TikTok, the latter of which was an unintended consequence. Advertisements were by far the most frequent form of fashion content participants saw, and even fashion content not necessarily labeled as an ad was still called into question as to whether or not the creator was being paid to promote the products shown within the video. Despite the cracks in this potential facade, participants seemed to be more influenced by the more covert advertisements — videos coming from individuals rather than brands (which is most content on TikTok) were reported to be more effective, and the more authentic they deemed the individual to be, the more likely they were to draw fashion inspiration from them.

With so much of the content centered around advertising items, it then became clear that the most commonly used selling point in TikTok fashion marketing is the low price of the items, often framed in relation to other items, whether a similar fashion item being sold by an established brand at a much higher price or something entirely unrelated, like a cup of coffee. This strategy is befitting of the type of fashion propagated on TikTok: cheap, rapidly produced ultra-fast fashion which, by nature of the ultra-fast fashion model that produces them, flourishes on social media marketing and e-commerce platforms (as opposed to brick and mortar stores) like SHEIN or TikTok's built-in platform, the TikTok Shop. The quality of these items, as low as it is, is negated by their ephemerality; designed and produced in mere days to respond to trends in real-time, these ultra-fast fashion items only look to capitalize on the latest trends as they rise, unconcerned with their durability as goods and the accelerated cycle of consumption they serve to promote. At the same time, fashion hauls as another leading style of content serve to promote both an increased volume of fashion purchases — normalizing

overconsumption while standardizing the means through which trends are disseminated — while also adopting the increased frequency of fashion purchases engendered by the ultra-fast fashion business model. When also taking into consideration the hyper-specific and personalized nature of TikTok's FYP, the desire for a sense of belonging and wanting to be more like the influencers one admires, TikTok's streamlining and integration of the purchasing process into its user interface, and how the ephemeral, short-form style of content on TikTok dissuades users from spending time thoroughly contemplating their every decision, the ultra-fast fashion industry and TikTok make for a highly lucrative combination. And because TikTok's FYP is so personalized, "Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 97). The concept of overarching, universally experienced trends that hold for years at a time, defining decades of pop culture, is a dying one. With every user placed in a unique set of boxes, the trends any two people see can be wildly different, though the model remains the same.

     As far as identity is concerned, this system leaves fashion consumers like these eleven participants with few avenues. The most obvious choice is that they could embrace the identities being sold to them, purchasing what they see which, in all likelihood given the strength of TikTok's algorithm, will be at least somewhat of interest to them. But the ultra-fast fashion industry, as has been discussed, has greatly increased the wastefulness endemic to the fashion industry, bringing about an increased volume of clothing waste now made from synthetic materials like polyester that are harmful both in their production and degradation, as they require fossil fuels to be produced and decompose much more slowly than items made out of materials like cotton. For

consumers who may be a bit more environmentally conscious, simply investing in more expensive, higher-quality items (that are less trendy) remains an option for those who can afford it. Thrifting is on the table, though secondhand stores are increasingly filled with ultra-fast fashion products, so a keen eye is then necessary. All in all, the process of finding identity through fashion is immensely complicated by ultra-fast fashion's social media integration to the point of becoming laborious on the part of consumers. A certain (fairly high) degree of consciousness is necessary, to say nothing of how alluring the unethically low prices — thanks to child labor and modern slavery — of ultra-fast fashion items can be to an age group (young adults) that tends to be as strapped for cash as it is focused on self-presentation and identity, leaving many participants feeling stuck between unethical consumption and an inability to participate in a key aspect of identity exploration, formation, and practice (Haug & Busch, 2015; Peake & Kenner, 2020; Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020 as cited in Dzhengiz et al., 2023). While this study's surveys and focus groups did not include significant discussions surrounding the labor practices that enable the ultra-fast fashion industry, the participants were generally aware that the prices on sites like the TikTok Shop and SHEIN were the product of an exploitative system.

Participants' main struggles regarding inauthenticity and pressure to dress a certain way came from two main places: school and work. The notion (whether stated or implied, though more often implied) that they had to dress in certain ways in certain places proved difficult to shake. Given the concept of a democratized fashion which, at least in theory, reduces the significance of one's occupation in how one dresses, the prevalence of campus and workplace "dress codes" in focus groups that did not

specifically ask about them is noteworthy and indicative of occupation still being a significant component of fashion sense today, at least for young adults who are actively exploring career paths.

Fashion content aside, TikTok's content curation system has seemingly done much to reshape the way in which young people consume media, raising questions about their autonomy in the practice of media consumption that, even outside of fashion content, is an integral component of identity exploration, formation, and practice. In general, there was a strong sense that regularly using TikTok wore on participants who felt they were being "fed" content, relegated to being passive consumers (perhaps fittingly, as it is called a social media "feed," after all). Feeling relatively powerless in what their FYP showed (despite the fact that it is built around their own interactions and engagements on the app), participants' experiences may warrant further research into TikTok's viability as a platform for exploring, forming, and practicing identity; while highly personalized built on the back of its industry-leading algorithm, the lack of control felt among this sample of TikTok users in regards to selecting the content they see could potentially engender a feeling of disconnection between each of their identities and the versions of each of them that TikTok sees them to be.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Research

Eleven participants are not a substantial enough sample to make a slew of broad generalizations about the relationship young adults have with fashion as a means of identity expression on TikTok. Nonetheless, the findings of this study serve to speak to the experiences of these eleven participants in great detail while also aiming to indicate broader phenomena outside of each participant's highly personalized bubble. The study

was designed with the goal of having between 15-20 participants, but struggles with recruiting participants for unpaid participation in a more longitudinal study proved difficult, constraining the sample size. For future research designed with a similar model, it may be necessary for researchers to ensure compensation to aid with both recruitment ensuring more consistent participation. While the eleven participants completed an average of 85% of their surveys, only ten participated in focus groups (to say nothing of the aforementioned Participant 2, who did not complete any surveys or attend a focus group session). Future research may also look to include younger adolescents and slightly older young adults (e.g. participants aged 15-22+, rather than just 18-22) as both high-school-aged adolescents and non-college-age young adults are similarly in critical stages of identity development and heavy social media users.

The largest recruitment obstacle was the fact that a surprisingly large number of young adults, at least at BC, do not actually use TikTok; there was a substantial number of people who replied to recruitment efforts asking if they could participate using Instagram Reels. One said they used TikTok in the summers but deleted it for the school year, while others had deleted it for different reasons and some had never even downloaded it at all. Nonetheless, all participants who did not have TikTok still had Instagram and used Reels in some capacity. Thus, future research may be interested in looking at both TikTok and Instagram Reels in taking a comparative approach, especially since the anecdotes provided by this research seem to indicate some noticeable differences in the style and format of content popular on each of the two platforms.

Concluding Thoughts

Ultimately, in a social media-driven ultra-fast fashion industry, trends come and go, ever-changing yet ever-powerful in dictating tastes and opinions. In a consumerist capitalist society, the significance of trends stands somewhat in opposition to fashion as a means of identity expression as one can only ever define themself in relation to trends that exist outside of their control. Dressing purely for oneself is thus not just a necessary benchmark in achieving fulfilling personal identity exploration, formation, and practice removed from the undue influence of trends, but also a sustainably-minded practice that rejects the relentless novelty offered by an ultra-fast fashion industry that is not only a massive contributor to global emissions but also only made possible through the use of wildly unethical labor practices.

References

Abidin, C. (2020). Mapping internet celebrity on TikTok: Exploring attention economies

and visibility labours. *Cultural Science Journal*, *12*(1), 77–103.

https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.140

Alfurqon, F. A. (2023). TikTok versus Instagram Reels: Platform for promotional content

for online fashion business (case study on online fashion brand Marasoe).

Educationist: Journal of Educational and Cultural Studies, *2*(1), 34-40.

https://jurnal.litnuspublisher.com/index.php/jecs/article/view/87

Allen, K., & Mendick, H. (2016). Popular culture, identity "play," and mobilities: Young

people and celebrity. In B. Evans, J. Horton, & T. Skelton (Eds.), *Play and*

Recreation, Health and Wellbeing (pp. 367–386). Springer Singapore.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4585-51-4_14

Badaoui, K., Lebrun, A., Su, C., & Bouchet, P. (2018). The influence of personal and

social identity on the clothing consumption of adolescents. *Canadian Journal of*

Administrative Sciences / Revue Canadienne Des Sciences de l'Administration,

35(1), 65–78. https://doi.org/10.1002/cjas.1397

Barnard, M. (1996). *Fashion as communication*. Routledge.

Benn, J. (2004). Consumer education between 'consumership' and citizenship:

Experiences from studies of young people. *International Journal of Consumer*

Studies, *28*(2), 108–116. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2003.00364.x

Bläse, R., Filser, M., Kraus, S., Puumalainen, K., & Moog, P. (2024). Non‑sustainable

buying behavior: How the fear of missing out drives purchase intentions in the

fast fashion industry. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *33*(2), 626–641.

https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.3509

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of

Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(1), 30–44.

https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Camargo, L. R., Pereira, S. C. F., & Scarpin, M. R. S. (2020). Fast and ultra-fast fashion

supply chain management: An exploratory research. *International Journal of*

Retail & Distribution Management, *48*(6), 537–553.

https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRDM-04-2019-0133

Cassidy, T. D., & van Schijndel, H. (2011). Youth identity ownership from a fashion

marketing perspective. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An*

International Journal, *15*(2), 163–177.

https://doi.org/10.1108/13612021111132618

Cheung, T. C., & Choi, S. Y. (2022). Fashion designer's identity self-verification through

social media engagement on Instagram. *Fashion and Textiles*, *9*(1), 7.

https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-021-00275-4

Chittenden, T. (2010). Digital dressing up: Modelling female teen identity in the

discursive spaces of the fashion blogosphere. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *13*(4),

505–520. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260903520902

Choi, A. (2020). Social comparison in fashion blogging: "Creative self" as the new genre

in fashion communication. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An*

International Journal, *24*(4), 651–665.

https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-07-2019-0140

Crane, D. (2000). *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*.
    University of Chicago Press.

Davis, F. (2008). *Fashion, culture, and identity*. University of Chicago Press.

Delhaye, C. (2006). The development of consumption culture and the individualization of
    female identity: Fashion discourse in the Netherlands 1880-1920. *Journal of
    Consumer Culture*, *6*(1), 87–115. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540506060866

Diabat, A., Kannan, D., & Mathiyazhagan, K. (2014). Analysis of enablers for
    implementation of sustainable supply chain management – A textile case. *Journal
    of Cleaner Production*, *83*, 391–403. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2014.06.081

Dzhengiz, T., Haukkala, T., & Sahimaa, O. (2023). (Un)Sustainable transitions towards
    fast and ultra-fast fashion. *Fashion and Textiles*, *10*(1), 19.
    https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-023-00337-9

Ewen, E. (1985). *Immigrant women in the land of dollars: Life and culture on the Lower
    East Side, 1890–1925*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Fuchs, C. (2021). *Social media: A critical introduction* (Third edition). SAGE.

Goldhaber, M. H. (1997). The attention economy and the Net. *First Monday*.
    https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v2i4.519

Haines, S., Fares, O. H., Mohan, M., & Lee, S. H. (Mark). (2023). Social media fashion
    influencer eWOM communications: Understanding the trajectory of sustainable
    fashion conversations on YouTube fashion haul videos. *Journal of Fashion
    Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, *27*(6), 1027–1046.
    https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-02-2022-0029

Hebdige, D. (1988). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. Routledge.

Heinze, A. (1990). *Adapting to abundance: Jewish immigrants, mass consumption, and the search for American identity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hendriksz, V. (2017, May 24). *Boohoo, asos & missguided pave the way for "ultrafast fashion."* FashionUnited. https://fashionunited.uk/news/fashion/boohoo-asos-missguided-pave-the-way-for-ultrafast-fashion/2017052424625

Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.

Kaiser, S. B., Nagasawa, R. H., & Hutton, S. S. (1991). Fashion, postmodernity and personal appearance: A symbolic interactionist formulation. *Symbolic Interaction*, *14*(2), 165–185. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1991.14.2.165

Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2010). Impacts of luxury fashion brand's social media marketing on customer relationship and purchase intention. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, *1*(3), 164–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2010.10593068

Kristensen, N. N., & Christensen, C. L. (2017). The mediatization of fashion: The case of fashion blogs. In O. Driessens, G. Bolin, A. Hepp, & S. Hjarvard (Eds.), *Dynamics Of Mediatization* (pp. 225–245). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62983-4_11

Kroger, J. (1996). *Identity in adolescence: The balance between self and other*. Routledge.

Kuipers, G. (2006). Television and taste hierarchy: The case of Dutch television comedy. *Media, Culture & Society*, *28*(3), 359–378. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443706062884

Lanphear, B. (2022, May 5). *The evolution of ootd: Instagram, tiktok & beyond*. He

Spoke Style. https://hespokestyle.com/ootd-meaning/

Lupinacci, L. (2021). 'Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing': Liveness and

compulsory continuous connectedness in social media. *Media, Culture & Society*,

43(2), 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939454

Lynch, A., & Strauss, M. D. (2007). *Changing fashion: A critical introduction to trend

analysis and meaning*. Berg.

Machin, D., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). Language style and lifestyle: The case of a

global magazine. *Media, Culture & Society*, *27*(4), 577–600.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443705054151

Maheshwari, S., & Holpuch, A. (2024, May 8). Why the U.S. is forcing TikTok to be sold

or banned. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/article/tiktok-ban.html

Marx, K. (1844). Estranged labour. *Marxists.org*.

https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm

McNeill, L., & Venter, B. (2019). Identity, self‑concept and young women's engagement

with collaborative, sustainable fashion consumption models. *International

Journal of Consumer Studies*, *43*(4), 368–378. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12516

Michael, J. (2015). It's really not hip to be a hipster: Negotiating trends and authenticity

in the cultural field. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, *15*(2), 163–182.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513493206

Niinimäki, K. (2010). Eco‑clothing, consumer identity and ideology. *Sustainable

Development*, *18*(3), 150–162. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.455

Parekh, F. S., & Schmidt, R. A. (2003). In pursuit of an identity – fashion marketing and

    the development of eating disorders. *British Food Journal*, *105*(4/5), 220–238.

    https://doi.org/10.1108/00070700310477022

Park, H. J., & Lin, L. M. (2020). Exploring attitude–behavior gap in sustainable

    consumption: Comparison of recycled and upcycled fashion products. *Journal of*

    Business Research, *117*, 623–628. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.08.025

Palfrey, J. G., & Gasser, U. (2008). *Born digital: Understanding the first generation of*

    digital natives. Basic Books.

Pangalila, M. C., & Aprilanty, F. (2022). The impact of TikTok fashion haul videos

    towards Generation Z's purchase decision in Indonesia. (2022). *International*

    Journal of Business and Technology Management.

    https://doi.org/10.55057/ijbtm.2022.4.3.33

Paulicelli, E., & Clark, H. (Eds.). (2009). *The fabric of cultures: Fashion, identity, and*

    globalization. Routledge.

Peters, L. D. (2014). You are what you wear: How plus-size fashion figures in fat identity

    formation. *Fashion Theory*, *18*(1), 45–71.

    https://doi.org/10.2752/175174114X13788163471668

Postman, N. (1986). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show*

    business. Penguin Books.

Rocamora, A. (2011). Personal fashion blogs: Screens and mirrors in digital self-portraits.

    Fashion Theory, *15*(4), 407–424.

    https://doi.org/10.2752/175174111X13115179149794

Rocamora, A. (2013). New fashion times: Fashion and digital media. In S. Black, A. de la

Haye, J. Entwistle, R. Root, & H. Thomas (Eds.), *The Handbook of Fashion*

Studies (pp. 61–77). Bloomsbury.

Schellewald, A. (2021). Communicative Forms on TikTok: Perspectives From Digital

Ethnography. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*, 1437–1457.

https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16414

Stone, G. P. (1962). Appearances and the Self. In Rose, A. M. (Ed.), *Human behavior*

and social processes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Titton, M. (2015). Fashionable personae: Self-identity and enactments of fashion

narratives in fashion blogs. *Fashion Theory*, *19*(2), 201–220.

https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14168357992391

Turow, J. (1997). *Breaking up America: Advertisers and the new media world*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

United Nations. (2015). *The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development*. Retrieved May 10,

2024, from https://sdgs.un.org/goals

West, E. (2010). A taste for greeting cards: Distinction within a denigrated cultural form.

Journal of Consumer Culture, *10*(3), 362–382.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540510376908

Williams, A. (2006, February 19). Here i am taking my own picture. *The New York*

Times.

https://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/fashion/sundaystyles/here-i-am-taking-my-

own-picture.html

Witzburg, F. M. (2021). Fashion Forward: Fashion Innovation in the Era of Disruption.

    Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal, *39*(2), 705–734.

World Bank. (2019). *How much do our wardrobes cost to the environment?* Retrieved

    May 10, 2024, from

    https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/09/23/costo-moda-medio-ambie

    nte

Zeng, J., Abidin, C., & Schäfer, M. (2021). Research Perspectives on TikTok and Its

    Legacy Apps: Introduction. *International Journal of Communication*, *15*,

    3161-3172. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14539