

The Death of Individuality

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Essay

Fashion has always been more than clothing. These days what people choose to wear can communicate their personalities and even the communities they feel connected to. Before someone speaks, the way they dress themselves can already give others an impression of who they might be. Because of this, fashion has often been understood as a form of self-expression. It allows people to experiment with how they want to be seen, how they want to express parts of themselves that are difficult to communicate through words. A person might wear something colourful because it makes them feel confident and someone might dress entirely in black because it reflects their mood also someone might combine different styles because they do not want to be defined by one particular aesthetic. Fashion has been deeply personal. However, the way people discover and participate in fashion has changed significantly with the growth of social media. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Pinterest have made fashion more visible and accessible than before but they have also created a culture where trends appear and disappear at an extremely fast pace. An old style can revive within days which would have taken years to come up back then. This makes me question that if people are constantly being shown what is fashionable and keep hoping on trend "Are they still dressing for themselves or are they gradually learning to dress according to what the internet tells them?"

The influence of trends on personal style is not something that began with social media. Fashion has always involved imitation and influence. People have looked to designers, celebrities, musicians, films, magazines and subcultures for inspiration throughout history. Trends have allowed people to feel connected to a particular period, community or cultural movement while still giving them opportunities to interpret those influences in their own ways. Back then, the movement of fashion was generally slower. A person might discover a style through a magazine or a film and they would have time to develop their own relationship with it. They could decide whether they actually liked the style while they modify it, combine it with things they already owned. Subcultures such as punk, goth, riot grrrls, grunge and hip-hop demonstrate how clothing could become a form of both belonging and individuality. People within these communities could share certain visual characteristics while still expressing themselves through customisation, styling and personal choices. The meaning of fashion came from how people interpreted clothing rather than simply from owning the pieces. This slower process allowed own personal style to develop through experimentation, mistakes and repetition rather than requiring people to immediately understand and adopt whatever was currently popular. This was authentic and cool.

However, Social media has changed this relationship by dramatically increasing the speed at which fashion moves. Instead of discovering trends through a limited number of magazines, designers or celebrities people are now exposed to thousands of images every day. I wake up and see a fashion trend that began in another part of the world only a few hours earlier. And then, I see someone already styling that outfit with similar products which they just bought without leaving their home. Fashion is no longer something that people have to actively search for since it is constantly placed in front of them. This accessibility can be exciting because it allows people to discover

designers, cultures and styles that they might never have encountered. At the same time, the constant stream of new ideas makes it increasingly difficult for people to stay with one style long enough to understand whether it genuinely belongs to them. Before someone has had time to develop a relationship with one trend, another has already appeared. I was also one of them and still trying to find my own self. Scrolling through social medias and comparing myself to others, everything seemed to scream "Fit in!". I realized that I was losing myself in the crowd and was following the wave of trends.

This acceleration has contributed to the rise of "microtrends". Rather than having a small number of major trends that dominate a season, social media can create countless smaller trends that become popular for only a short period. A particular pair of shoes, silhouette, colour, accessory or styling techniques can suddenly appear everywhere and then disappear just as quickly. What makes this different from traditional fashion cycles is that the emotional pressure was created by constant visibility. When a person repeatedly sees the same item on their feed, it can begin to feel as though everyone owns it and that they are missing something by not having it themselves. The desire to participate may come not from the genuine interest in the garment but from the fear of being left out. Fashion becomes connected to a constant need to keep up and keeping up becomes increasingly difficult when trends change almost as quickly as the content appearing on a phone screen.

This is where social media algorithms become important. The platforms people use do not simply show them a random selection of images. They learn from what the users watch, like, save, search for and interact with and then continue providing contents that will keep their attention. As a result, a person can become addicted and surrounded by a particular visual world unconsciously choosing to create it. The more they engage with a certain aesthetic, the more familiar and desirable it can become. Eventually, the person may believe that the style represents their own taste when part of that preference has been reinforced through repeated exposure. This necessarily does not mean that people have no control over their choices but it does show how difficult it can be to separate personal preference from constant digital influence.

This repetition created by social medias can also influence on interests within contemporary fashion. People are constantly encouraged to be unique, express themselves and find their own aesthetic and yet millions of people are being exposed to many of the same images at the same time. The same platforms that shows individuality can produce visual similarities. Someone may see an outfit described as a particular aesthetic and purchase similar clothes and feel that they have discovered a way to express themselves but on the other hand thousands of other people are doing exactly the same thing and thinking the same. What began as an individual discovery becomes a recognisable formula. The person is technically making a personal choice but the choices available to them have already been heavily influenced by what the platform has decided to show them.

So the rise of online aesthetics make this contradiction even more visible. Fashion has increasingly become organised into easily recognisable categories such as "clean girl", "grunge", "coquette", "Y2K", "dark academia" and many others. These categories can be useful because they give people titles for describing styles that they may not have known how to explain before. Someone who has always been attracted to a certain type of clothing can suddenly find an online community that shares their interests. For a person who feels different from the people around them, discovering an online fashion community can be empowering. It can provide inspiration and the confidence to experiment with clothing. However, aesthetics can become restrictive when they stop being sources of inspiration and began functioning as rules. Instead of asking what they personally like people begin to ask whether an outfit belongs to the aesthetic they have chosen.

This changes the role of fashion in a subtle but important way. Instead of using clothing to explore identity, people begin to use clothing to construct an identity that has already been defined for them. The difference between these two ideas may seem small but it changes the purpose of getting dressed. Personal style is usually

developed through uncertainty. People try things that do not work, wear clothes they later regret, discover unexpected combinations and gradually learn what makes them feel comfortable and confident. This process is not always visually perfect but that's what makes style personal. However, social media often presents finished identities. A person can see an entire aesthetic already organised for them including clothing, makeup, hair, accessories, music and even lifestyle. Instead of experimenting to discover who they are, they can simply select an identity that already exists online.

There is nothing wrong with this but fashion has always provided people with ways to experiment with different versions of themselves. Someone may try a cutie style one month and something more rebellious the next. Clothing can be playful and people should not be expected to maintain a permanent identity. The problem appears when the pressure to fit into a particular aesthetic becomes stronger than the desire to explore. If someone feels that they cannot wear something because it does not match the identity they have created online, fashion becomes limiting. The very thing that should provide freedom begins to create another set of expectations.

Social media also changes the way people experience other people's clothing. Before the rise of platforms, people generally encountered fashion within physical environments. They saw someone walking down the street and noticed what their friends were wearing or encountered clothing in a shop or magazine but these days, a person can see hundreds of outfits before they have even left their bed. This creates an enormous amount of comparison. Someone can look at their own wardrobe and suddenly feel that it is boring because they have just seen dozens of carefully styled outfits online. They may begin to believe that they need new clothes in order to look interesting, even when their existing wardrobe already contains pieces they genuinely like or already has a pile of clothes.

The problem is the fact that social media does not represent everyday life in a neutral way. People usually choose what they want others to see. They only post what they want others to see. However, users may compare their ordinary appearance with other people's carefully constructed presentations. Fashion becomes part of this comparison. An outfit may no longer be judged only by how it feels to wear it or how it looks in person but it may be judged by how it photographs whether it fits current online aesthetics or whether other people will respond positively to it. Clothing can therefore become a performance for an audience that may not even be physically present.

This is particularly significant because fashion has traditionally involved the body and the physical experience of wearing something. The weight of a fabric, the movement of a silhouette, the texture of a garment and the way it changes when someone walks are all part of fashion. Social media reduces many of these qualities to an image and short videos. An outfit that looks impressive on a screen may not be comfortable. When the visual image becomes more important than the experience of wearing the garment, fashion risks becoming something produced for overconsumption rather than something lived in.

At the same time, it would be unfair to describe people who follow trends as lacking individuality. Humans naturally learn from one another and imitation is an important part of culture. No style exists completely independently from previous influences. Designers themselves reference history, art, architecture, music, other designers and different cultures. Fashion is built through reinterpretation and transformation. Therefore, following a trend is not automatically the opposite of individuality. The question is what a person does with that influence. Someone can take a popular trend and reinterpret it in a way that reflects their own personality while another person can reproduce the trend almost exactly because they feel pressured to look current.

This difference between inspiration and imitation is where personal style becomes important. Inspiration gives a person something to work with while imitation can remove the need to make a personal decision. When someone sees a garment online and thinks "I love this but I would style it differently" they are already beginning to develop

their own relationship with the trend. They might alter it or combine the garment with something unexpected. This is one of the ways individuality can survive within a culture dominated by social media.

There are also positive aspects to the way social media has changed fashion. It has given independent designers and small creative communities opportunities that were previously difficult to access. A designer is no longer necessarily dependent on traditional fashion magazines or large institutions to reach an audience. A student experimenting with clothing can share their works and receive responses from people across the world. Someone interested in an unusual style can find others with similar interests even if nobody around them dresses that way. Social media has therefore expanded the possibilities for fashion communities and allowed many voices to become visible.

For people interested in alternative and experimental fashion like me, this is particularly valuable. Avant-garde designers, independent artists, DIY creators and people interested in subcultures can find inspiration that would have required extensive research back then. A person can discover historical garments, underground designers and unfamiliar techniques with a few searches. Social media therefore encourages individuality when it is used as a tool for exploration rather than a source of instructions. The same platform that tells someone what is trending can also introduce them to something completely outside the mainstream.

The challenge is not to reject social media or trends completely. Doing that would ignore the fact that fashion has always developed through communication and influence. Instead, people need to become more conscious of how they respond to what they see. Developing personal style requires paying attention to one's own reactions instead of constantly looking outward for approval. It can mean wearing the same garment repeatedly even when a new trend appears and it can mean keeping an old piece because it has sentimental value. Individuality does not always require something completely new. Sometimes it comes from seeing something familiar differently.

This challenges the idea that fashion must constantly be replaced. The rapid movement of social media trends can encourage overconsumption because people are repeatedly presented with reasons to buy something new. If a person feels that their wardrobe becomes outdated every few weeks, it becomes almost impossible to feel satisfied with what they already own. Personal style can provide an alternative to this cycle because it allows clothing to become more valuable through familiarity and personal meaning. A garment can become more interesting the longer someone owns it, the longer it creates memories.

So, the relationship between social media and fashion is not simply a story about technology destroying individuality. It is more complicated than that. Social media has made fashion faster, more accessible and more interconnected but it has also changed the environment in which personal style develops. People now have access to an almost unlimited amount of inspiration yet they are also exposed to an almost unlimited amount of pressure to keep up. The same screen can show someone a designer they would never have discovered otherwise. I think the real question is whether people should follow trends or not but whether if they are still capable of deciding why they follow them. Trends are not the enemy of individuality. They can be starting points and references for experimentation. The problem begins when a trend becomes an instruction rather than an inspiration. When people stop asking what they like and begin asking what they are supposed to like fashion loses part of its meaning.

Fashion is at its most powerful when it allows people to communicate something personal. It does not have to fit perfectly into an online aesthetic or receive thousands of likes. It can be strange, imperfect, repetitive and even difficult to explain. In fact, some of the most personal styles develop precisely because people stop trying to make every part of their appearance make sense to everyone else. In a world where the same images can reach millions of people within seconds, individuality may no longer mean finding something that nobody else has seen. It may mean taking something that everyone has seen and giving it a meaning that belongs to you. A trend can be borrowed but personal style is created through interpretation. The difference is not necessarily in what people wear

but in why they wear it and what they do with it.

Social media will continue to influence fashion and trends will continue to change. There will always be another aesthetic and another viral style that suddenly appears everywhere. Trying to escape trends completely is probably impossible and perhaps it is not even necessary. In my opinion, what matters is maintaining enough awareness to recognise when inspiration has become imitation. Fashion should give people the freedom to experiment rather than forcing them to constantly prove to fit in. Perhaps, the most individual thing a person can do is not to reject every trend but to stop allowing trends to decide who they are. Personal style does not need to be completely original to be authentic. It only needs to contain something that belongs to the person wearing it. In a culture where algorithms constantly suggest what we should look at, become and buy, choosing what feels genuinely like ourselves can itself become an act of self-expression.