

Fast Fashion and Digital Deception: Consumerism among Youth in Kerala

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Abstract

Fast fashion has emerged as a dominant trend in consumer culture, driven by rapid production cycles, influencer marketing, and algorithmic persuasion. Social media platforms blur geographical boundaries, making global fashion trends accessible and promoting hyper-consumption. Perceptions of coolness can create a halo effect for brands leading to impulsive purchase behaviour, leading to speedy consumption and increased clothing waste. However, beneath the appeal of affordability and accessibility, a complex web of digital conspiracies, surveillance capitalism, psychological manipulation and misinformation shapes consumer behaviour. The digital marketing strategies create an illusion of choice, fostering product maximization and impulsive consumption especially among generation Z consumers. By critically analysing digital discourse, marketing strategies and consumer psychology in reinventing fashion narratives among youth, especially in Kerala, this research paper aims to unravel the hidden mechanisms of fast fashion and post-modern consumerism, highlighting the need to embrace slow and sustainable fashion.

Keywords: fast fashion, consumer culture, social media influencers, surveillance capitalism, hyperreality, sustainable fashion

Introduction

“A fashion is merely a form of ugliness so absolutely unbearable that we have to alter it every six months!” (Wilde qtd.in “Philosophy of Dress”). Like Oscar Wilde ironically stated in his essay, fashion aesthetics is transient in nature and trends keep on changing. This reflects the fast fashion paradigm, where the constant production of new trends demands a continual makeover of our wardrobe, prioritising aesthetic appeal over durability and sustainability.

Fast fashion refers to cheaply produced replicas of luxury fashion brands, adhering to current trends to meet consumer demand. The rise of fast fashion has significantly altered global consumption patterns, with its effects deeply permeating regional cultures, including Kerala. Digital platforms and social media influencers play a crucial role in promoting mass-produced, low-cost clothing through potentially deceptive marketing strategies. Influencer-driven marketing has fuelled the demand for affordable and trendy clothing. This web of digital manipulation operates through complex surveillance capitalism, in which our personal information and data harvested from our online activity are used to track us and shape our consumer behaviour through targeted advertisements. The interaction between influencers and their followers is personal and persuasive, creating more impact than traditional advertising methods. Such digital marketing ecosystem works on psychological manipulation and misinformation, transforming users into both products and targets.

Fast fashion treats garments as transient commodities rather than possessions. The excessive consumption of clothing creates a throwaway culture in which garments are used only a handful of times and then discarded, either to make way for new trends or due to the rapid deterioration in its quality. In contrast, sustainable fashion seeks to transform the clothing preferences by prioritising ecological responsibility and social justice. It promotes

changes in the fashion system towards mindful consumption and ethical choices. This involves eco-friendly practices in clothing production, fair labour compensations and lowering carbon footprint.

This study examines the digital deceptive techniques used in fast fashion, analysing how online fashion trends influence dress choices and consumer behaviour especially in Kerala. It draws on the social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts of fast fashion.

Fashion as Status Symbol

Material goods play a symbolic role signifying ‘...status, identity, social cohesion, group norms and the pursuit of personal and cultural meaning’ (Jackson). Just like Tim Jackson says in his work, “Motivating Sustainable Consumption”, consumer goods serve as symbols within social life that construct an image of who we are to ourselves and to society. Our consumption shapes, and is shaped by identity, norms and cultural values. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. It refers to the non-economic assets that help people succeed in society. It exists in three forms: Embodied (tastes, dispositions, lifestyle, fashion sense), Objectified (material objects like clothes, books, art), and Institutionalized cultural capital (degrees, qualifications, credentials).

Influencers on social media function as what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural intermediaries’, as they can convert commodities into symbolic capital or markers of taste, while concealing the marketing intent behind them. This process results in a form of digital deception, wherein consumption is misrecognized as an ethical choice or refined taste, masking the exploitative and environmentally destructive conditions of production in global fashion systems. Digital platforms, particularly Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, etc transform inexpensive, mass-produced clothing into markers of cultural legitimacy.

It appears to be a great deal when the internet trending pop-themed tees or wide-legged jeans become instantly available at affordable prices, or when the first copies of popular celebrity-endorsed branded clothes are sold at a fraction of the original price tag. For consumers, especially youth navigating digitally mediated fashion cultures, a minor compromise in quality seems a reasonable exchange for remaining fashionable and socially relevant, to stay on trend or fit in. But the real question is whether the quality concession is made only at the level of the garment, or on a wider scale, impacting the authenticity of identity formation and weakening our ethical commitment to environmental sustainability.

Social media plays the lead role in reshaping and reinventing fashion narratives. Trends can emerge and circulate at an unprecedented pace, what once ruled the fashion landscape can become outdated, and even what was considered of bygone days can resurface in the spotlight. This rapid cycle of visibility and revival is driven largely by data collection, algorithmic amplification and influencer participation. Influencers on social media are the content creators who possess the persuasive power to sway their viewers on what to purchase and what not to. In such formats, strategic commercial marketing is masqueraded as self-expression and personal choices.

The Role of Influencers

In the modern times, the real marketing happens in the media pages, where a hyperreal world is created by the influencers through their curated pages. Their algorithm friendly design brings up the product repeatedly to our sight, making fashion a marker of identity, or like they say, a form of ‘self-care’, ‘therapy’ or ‘empowerment’. This mentality normalizes excessive and unsustainable purchasing behaviour. Advertisements are disguised as personal recommendations. Sponsored fashion content is embedded within personal narratives like daily routines, self-care, travel, or body positivity in which the truth is distorted. The other main idea is to market the products in a funny reel format which the viewers can relate to. The more relatable the content is, the more visibility it gains through

likes and shares. This makes the viewers less likely to question the commercial intent behind fashion recommendations.

Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckman in their book *Social Construction of Reality* argued that society is created by humans and human interaction. Reality is not objective and fixed but a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon. People participate in ongoing social processes according to their perspectives, create and interpret the meaning and structure of the world they live in.

Hyperreality as stated by Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, refers to a state where the representation seems more real than reality itself. It is a condition where simulated versions of reality become more significant and real than the original reality they are meant to represent. Image driven sites trigger the users to transform themselves to live up to the curated images exhibited and popularised by others. The accounts or feeds of influencers create such a hyperreal world where visual appeal and trend conformity dominate purchasing decisions leading to impulse buying. They taught us to dress like celebrities, follow trends instantly. This marketing gimmick had created a sense of false urgency towards trend-driven attires, normalising a cycle of constant purchasing and discarding.

Influencer marketing amplifies a bandwagon effect, which is a psychological phenomenon in which people do something primarily because other people are doing it, regardless of their own beliefs, which they may ignore or override. This tendency of people creates herd mentality in which they just follow the crowd to gain visibility and avoid social exclusion.

The Netflix series *Emily in Paris* has provided a prime platform for brands to strategically and seamlessly integrate their products into the storyline, where marketing feels like an overt natural extension of the plot. This showcases the impact storytelling can have on consumer engagement. A designer outfit or a limited-edition perfume is framed as part of the character's lifestyle choices, reinforcing desirability through context rather than promotion. This integration effectively turned episodes into interactive storefronts. This series offers a clear signal of where brand marketing is headed, not towards louder interruptions, but towards deeper integration where the story itself becomes the point of sale (media brief). Just like the lead character in the series says, 'The most powerful branding tool is word of mouth. People scroll past ads, but when they see someone whose tastes they admire raving about something, they pay attention' ("Rome Has Fallen").

Our trust in influencers leads us to trusting the product they market, with no further research. This is an instance of halo effect which occurs when the positive perceptions of a person influence how we evaluate unrelated attributes associated with them. The admiration for an influencer's talent, achievements, beauty, fitness or lifestyle can lead us to positive perceptions of the brands they promote. This serves as a key marketing technique which encourages impulsive buying. But influencer marketing also holds the transformative potential in encouraging slow fashion by promoting thrift stores, repeated outfit use.

Incredibly low prices and addictive shopping experiences revolutionize the e-commerce sector. The rapid rise of Temu, a Chinese e-commerce app popular in USA and Europe, was exemplified by its \$14 million Super Bowl advertisement urging consumers to "shop like a billionaire" (Gu). This slogan constructs a hyperreal consumer identity in which abundance and elite status are promoted through low-cost mass consumption. Users, mainly youth had already normalised the platform before its mainstream debut. This highlights the role of influencer culture and algorithmic visibility in commodifying desire.

The main disadvantage of the fast fashion industry is the unethical production system. Trendy clothes made cheaply available are manufactured in factories in the underdeveloped countries with mostly women as workers, struggling overtime for bare minimum wages in

unsafe conditions. The most horrifying proof of this is what happened in Dhaka, Bangladesh in the year 2013, where an eight storeyed garment factory collapsed leaving 1100 dead. It is considered as one of the worst industrial accidents ever and raised the serious questions of workspace safety and protection of the labourers. But the grim truth is, nothing much has changed in this exploitative sector.

The discarded clothes from fast fashion supply chains get dumped in Ghana, Chile, Kenya and other underdeveloped countries. They get accumulated in landfills or informal dumping sites and contaminate air and water systems. This contributes to long-term environmental degradation, shifting the burden from consumer nations to economically weaker nations. The mass-scale production within fast fashion supply chains, through the extensive use of synthetic fibres like polyester, nylon etc contributes to fossil fuel depletion, microplastic shedding and significant carbon emissions. Unethical purchasing practices feed a system of overconsumption and disposal that destroys ecosystem and the lives of commons.

Fast Fashion in Kerala

Fast fashion entered the Indian market through global brands such as Zara and H&M, which were characterised by rapid trend turnover and the promise of global fashion accessibility. They were launched to attract the Indians who considered everything international to be of higher quality, discarding locally made products. These brands familiarised Indian consumers, particularly urban youth with the idea of constantly updated collections aligned with international trends. Soon after, Indian retail brands such as Max Fashion and Reliance Trends adopted similar fast fashion strategies. They conditioned us to believe that clothing should be cheap, instant and unlimited.

In recent years, a new wave of ultra-accessible fashion brands including Zudio, Yousta, Style Union, and MEND has further accelerated fast fashion consumption. These brands operate through store expansion, minimal pricing, and trend-focused designs. Online shopping sites like Amazon, Myntra, Meesho etc have made shopping accessible and affordable, with their diverse range and personalized suggestions. By embedding fast fashion into everyday shopping habits rather than occasion based, they have normalised frequent clothing purchases even across smaller cities and semi-urban regions in states like Kerala.

In a recent on-the-street interview conducted by Manorama News, the shoppers shared that the fast fashion brands made available the latest updated trends at an affordable price, which made shopping a casual activity rather than a luxury. The fast fashion industry replaced seasonal production with rapid, low-cost, trend-driven cycles that prioritise speed, novelty, and profit over durability, labour ethics, and environmental degradation.

In a study conducted by Ms. Subitha N and Dr. Meena Suganthi.G on “The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Fashion and Beauty Purchase Decisions among Female College Students in Kerala”, it was concluded that social media influencers have a significant and persuasive impact on the fashion and beauty consumption patterns of young women in Kerala. Generation Z users highly engaged with digital platforms, increasingly rely on influencers for cues about trending products and style choices, often prioritising influencer recommendations over traditional advertising. It can be said that social media has played a huge role in reinventing fashion narratives, especially among youth.

By observing the fashion content uploaded by influencers or celebrities, it is evident that they promote the marketing mostly in a subtle manner, by making it appear natural. They integrate the products in their vlogs titled ‘Get ready with me’ (GRWM) videos, ‘What did I wear in my travel’, ‘Outfit of The Day’ (OOTD), by creating hauls (showing off new purchases) or daily routines and then link the products in the description box. This motivates followers to find the products without realizing the commercial intent. Fast fashion uses strategic devices like fake sales to drive impulse buys and create an illusion of savings.

Consumption appears natural and is framed as ‘self-care’ or ‘self-expression’ rather than commercial activity. What we post and how we post become part of our identity performance and thus lifestyle branding becomes a cultural capital.

The “Guidelines for Influencer Advertising in Digital Media” were issued by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), a self-regulatory industry body that oversees advertising standards in India and seeks to protect consumers from misleading content. As per that, influencers are required to clearly disclose any material connection with a brand. This includes paid compensation, free products, discounts, gifts, trips, or other incentives whenever they promote products on digital platforms. These disclosures must be upfront, prominent, and easy for the average consumer to understand, using labels such as “#ad”, “Sponsored”, “Collaboration”, or “Paid Partnership”. But the influencers tend to bypass or blur the guidelines, masquerading commercial marketing as authentic lifestyle content. This reinforces fast fashion consumption by normalising frequent purchases and framing them as spontaneous, personal choices rather than market-driven behaviours.

Traditionally, the fashion industry operated on a slow, seasonal model and clothing was produced in limited quantities. This system allowed time for design, craftsmanship, and durability, and consumers bought clothes primarily based on need and occasion. One’s personal wardrobe was filled with memories. Every clothing piece told a story, retold through generations, preserved with care and inherited with pride. Like Krithi Kadambari, a content creator on Instagram says, clothing before was part of a culture. “Every piece was worn, re-worn, repaired and respected, the radical acts of sustainability” (@sustainable.hummingbird). But now, clothing moved from being a long-term possession to a short-lived commodity.

In Kerala, the expansion of fast fashion has posed a significant challenge to khadi, a fabric historically associated with ethical production, cultural identity, and Gandhian values. Handloom sector is facing a serious setback because of the radical shift in the fashion preferences of the generation who value algorithm-driven commodified aesthetics more than ethical consumption and durability of the fabric. While fast fashion is framed as modern and aspirational through social media narratives, khadi is frequently confined to symbolic or ceremonial contexts. This led to a shift in consumer perception from ethical choices to trend-based identity performance.

It is high time that we reduce our pace and redesign the fashion system. This requires a shift in our mindset from instant gratification to value and longevity. Reducing consumption is the most effective step towards sustainability. The assumption that each occasion needs a new outfit is culturally produced and marketed by the brands. Repeated wearing of the outfits should be encouraged. Thrifting deserves more social and digital validation. When repetition and longevity of clothes become markers of taste and distinction, fashion economy begins to transform.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how social media narratives have reshaped fashion consumption patterns, particularly among youth, by transforming desire into perceived necessity. These practices sustain a cycle of overconsumption that raises serious ecological concerns, including textile waste and resource depletion causing environmental degradation. Social media influencers have emerged as pivotal figures in the fashion and beauty industry landscape. As in the global scenario, consumers in Kerala are also motivated to buy the trendy outfits made available at cheap rates by fast fashion brands. Despite Kerala’s rich handloom and khadi traditions, fast fashion’s affordability, trend responsiveness, and influencer-driven visibility have shifted youth preferences away from culturally rooted, sustainable textiles. Influencers attract the target audience through marketing that appears natural and a necessary aspect of modern life.

Ultimately, this research underscores that fast fashion thrives not merely through economic accessibility but through digital deception, carefully curated to mask environmental and cultural costs. By situating influencer marketing within broader theoretical frameworks of hyperreality, cultural capital, and sustainable consumption, the study calls for greater media literacy, ethical regulation, and a reevaluation of indigenous fashion practices.

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