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The Influence of Haul Culture vs. Peers on High School Fashion

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ABSTRACT

The influence of social media and peer groups on adolescent clothing consumption has become increasingly relevant as digital platforms accelerate the spread of fashion trends. This study examines the extent to which digital influencer "haul" culture and localized peer recommendations influence the clothing purchasing habits of high school students. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was administered to 104 students in grades 9–12 at Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School. Participants responded to Likert-scale questions measuring influencer-related and peer-related influence, as well as questions addressing conflicting influencer and peer opinions and perceived sources of pressure to remain on trend. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize response patterns, while a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare participants' influencer and peer composite scores. Peer influence received a higher composite score ($M = 3.18$) than influencer influence ($M = 2.77$), and this difference was statistically significant ($W = 2759$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that, within this sample, peers may play a stronger role than digital influencers in students' reported clothing-related decision-making. The results indicate that although digital influencers may introduce or increase awareness of fashion trends, localized peer environments may provide a stronger source of validation when adolescents make clothing-related decisions.

INTRODUCTION

The global fashion industry has undergone a radical transformation in the last decade, shifting from a traditional seasonal model to an "ultra-fast" production cycle that prioritizes digital engagement over garment longevity. The global fashion market, valued at $178.58 billion in 2026 and projected to reach $388.56 billion by 2034, reflects the rapid growth in fast-fashion consumption (Fortune Business Insights). Fast fashion manufacturers prioritize quick production to make trendy apparel widely accessible to consumers. In addition, the spread of information about recent fashionable goods on social media and the growing number of influencers promoting such products have significantly increased global demand. New online shops emerge almost every day in a highly consumerist market, where shoppers often justify purchases based solely on perceived trendiness. While the availability of inexpensive clothing contributes to market growth, adolescent consumption is increasingly driven by digital "haul" culture on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Unlike traditional advertising, "hauls" involve influencers—often perceived by their audience as peers—showcasing massive quantities of newly acquired apparel. This

perception is associated with what researchers Hoffner and Bond describe as parasocial relationships, in which viewers develop one-sided emotional bonds with media figures (Hoffner and Bond). This bond is unique. The high-frequency, intimate nature of social media content uniquely strengthens these bonds. Often, they share personal anecdotes and film in private settings, such as their homes, and adolescents begin to perceive them as people they have a genuine connection with, rather than corporate spokespeople. Consequently, the influencer's fashion recommendations are interpreted not as marketing but as trusted peer advice, significantly lowering the consumer's critical defenses and making participation in "haul" culture feel like a social requirement. This dynamic shifts purchasing behavior from need-based decision-making to socially motivated consumption, where buying clothing becomes a means of aligning with perceived social norms. In this digital environment, the influencer does not merely sell a product; they model a lifestyle and establish "micro-trends" that feel both personal and time-sensitive to followers. According to Vogue Business, micro-trends are driven by social media algorithms that prioritize "ultra-fast" novelty, often resulting in the rapid over-consumption and subsequent disposal of specific aesthetic items (Francombe). For the high school demographic, these digital cues serve as a constant stream of social data, signaling what is currently "relevant" in the global fashion conversation.

However, digital influence does not operate in isolation; adolescents must also navigate social pressures within their physical environments. Once they leave digital spaces, they enter school environments where localized peer groups exert a more immediate form of social pressure. Within these groups, clothing acts as a form of social currency; wearing the "correct" brand or style provides students with social capital, while wearing an outdated or "wrong" item can lead to social friction. Psychological research identifies this as normative social influence, where individuals conform to group norms to avoid social rejection or to gain "social currency" within their specific peer group (Prinstein and Dodge). Unlike the global nature of a TikTok micro-trend, these local norms are highly specific to a student's campus. This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based research design to examine the relative influence of digital influencer 'haul' culture and localized peer recommendations on students' reported clothing-related decision-making. Specifically, it asks: To what extent do digital influencer "haul" culture and localized peer recommendations influence the clothing purchasing habits of high school students? A quantitative, cross-sectional survey of 104 students in grades 9–12 at Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School was used to measure students' reported responses to influencer and peer-related fashion cues. The study hypothesized that both forms of influence would affect clothing-related decisions, but that peer recommendations would have a stronger influence on students' reported clothing-related decision-making. By examining these influences within the same population, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how adolescents navigate online trends alongside the opinions and behaviors of their immediate peers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Influencers and Parasocial Relationships

Social media influencers play a significant role in shaping adolescent consumer behavior through emotional connection and perceived credibility. One well-established mechanism is the parasocial relationship, a one-sided emotional bond formed between a viewer and a media figure, which can impact attitudes and decision-making. Hoffner and Bond explain that when individuals feel personally connected to an influencer, they are more likely to internalize the influencer's opinions and recommendations (Hoffner and Bond). Studies show that this form of connection can translate into real purchasing behavior: Lou and Kim found that adolescents exposed to influencer content demonstrated higher materialistic values and greater intention to purchase products endorsed by influencers (Lou and Kim). Similarly, research by De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders suggests that influencers who are perceived as relatable and credible have a stronger effect on followers' brand attitudes and consumer decisions compared to traditional advertising (De Veirman et al.). Freberg et al. further emphasize that influencers are often viewed as trustworthy opinion leaders, making their recommendations particularly persuasive (Freberg et al.). Taken together, this research indicates that influencer content does more than raise awareness of products; it actively shapes young consumers' beliefs, values, and clothing purchasing behaviors, especially when influencers are seen as relatable peers rather than distant celebrities. This influence provides foundational support for understanding how haul culture may impact high school students' purchasing habits. However, while these studies demonstrate the persuasive power of influencers, they primarily focus on shaping consumer attitudes rather than examining whether this influence consistently translates into real-world purchasing behavior.

Micro-Trends & Overconsumption

Closely linked to fast fashion, micro-trends accelerate clothing consumption among adolescents by promoting constant novelty and rapid turnover. Social media platforms repeatedly expose users to new styles and influencer content, reinforcing the perception that staying relevant requires frequent purchasing. Djafarova and Rushworth found that social media influencers significantly impact young consumers' purchase intentions by creating aspirational lifestyles that encourage continuous consumption (Djafarova and Rushworth). Similarly, research on social media and consumer behavior demonstrates that digital environments increase impulsive purchasing by combining social comparison with immediate access to products (Chen et al.). Broader consumption patterns highlight the scale of this effect. Consumers today purchase approximately 60% more clothing than they did 15 years ago, while garments are worn significantly fewer times before being discarded, reflecting a shift toward rapid consumption cycles (Igini). This pattern is reinforced by the structure of fast fashion, which prioritizes speed and disposability over longevity. According to Niinimäki et al., the fast fashion industry promotes frequent replacement of clothing, contributing to unsustainable levels of consumption and waste (Niinimäki et al.). Together, these findings illustrate how micro-trends, driven by social media exposure, influencer culture, and fast fashion production, encourage adolescents to engage in repeated cycles of purchasing and

disposal. Rather than fulfilling functional needs, clothing consumption becomes tied to maintaining social relevance and keeping pace with rapidly changing trends. While these findings highlight how digital platforms accelerate exposure to trends, they do not address whether adolescents ultimately adopt these trends within their immediate social environments.

Peer Influence & Normative Social Pressure

Localized peer groups play a significant role in shaping adolescent clothing decisions through social and normative pressures. One well-established mechanism is normative social influence, where individuals conform to group expectations to gain acceptance or avoid social rejection. Prinstein and Dodge explain that adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer norms, often prioritizing peer approval over personal preference (Prinstein and Dodge). Studies show that this pressure can directly affect clothing choices: Berger and Heath found that clothing functions as a social signal, conveying identity and belonging within a peer group (Berger and Heath). Similarly, Bearden and Etzel's research on reference group theory demonstrates that adolescents often model their purchasing behaviors on peers they admire or consider socially important (Bearden and Etzel). Brown and Larson further emphasize that peer influence intensifies during adolescence as social status and friendships become central to self-concept (Brown and Larson). Collectively, these findings suggest that peer influence extends beyond mere imitation of trends. It shapes self-expression, social positioning, and the perceived "rules" of belonging within school communities. Adolescents may make clothing decisions not just to fit in, but to signal status, identity, or alignment with valued social groups. Recognizing this influence provides a more nuanced understanding of how high school environments themselves reinforce consumption patterns, sometimes in ways that amplify, counteract, or even override digital trends. This suggests that peer influence may play a more immediate role in shaping clothing-related decisions, particularly in contexts where social acceptance is directly at stake.

Research Gap & Comparative Influence

Although existing research has established that both digital influencers and peers can shape adolescents' attitudes and behaviors, these influences are often examined independently. Research on digital influencers has primarily focused on social media exposure, parasocial relationships, and consumer behavior, while research on peer influence has emphasized social conformity, group norms, and interpersonal decision-making. Fewer studies directly compare the relative influence of these two sources within the same adolescent population. In particular, limited research has examined how high school students respond when digital influencers and their immediate peer groups provide conflicting signals about clothing and fashion.

Examining these influences together is important because adolescents encounter both online and offline social pressures when making everyday consumer decisions. A student may encounter a fashion trend through an influencer but then encounter different opinions from friends or classmates. Studying these influences simultaneously therefore provides a more complete understanding of how adolescents navigate competing sources of social influence rather than treating digital and peer influence as separate processes.

The present study addresses this gap by examining digital influencer haul culture and localized peer recommendations within the same sample of high school students. By measuring both forms of influence and comparing their relative strength, the study seeks to determine whether one source appears more influential in students' reported clothing purchasing decisions and to examine how students respond when influencer trends conflict with peer opinions.

HYPOTHESIS

METHODOLOGY

This study hypothesizes that digital influencer 'haul' culture and localized peer recommendations both influence high school students' clothing-related decision-making, but peer recommendations will have a stronger influence than digital influencer content. The findings are expected to indicate a layered pattern of influence, where digital content shapes awareness and interest, while peer environments may more strongly influence students' reported clothing-related decisions, especially in situations where the two sources conflict.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey-based research design to examine the relative influence of digital influencer "haul" culture and localized peer recommendations on the clothing purchasing behaviors of high school students. A survey-based approach was appropriate because it enabled the efficient collection of self-reported attitudes and behaviors from a relatively large sample within a natural social environment. This is particularly useful when examining social influence, which is inherently perception-based. The survey was distributed among students in grades 9–12 at Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School, creating a localized sample aligned with the study's focus on peer-based social environments.

Participants

This study's participants included 104 students in grades 9–12 attending Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and completed the survey voluntarily. This sampling method was appropriate due to accessibility and the study's focus on a specific, localized peer environment. Only responses from participants who provided consent were included in the analysis. The survey was distributed via Google Forms, and participation was anonymous. A total of 104 usable responses were collected.

Materials & Measures

This study used an online survey created in Google Forms. The survey included Likert-scale and scenario-based questions designed to measure two primary constructs: influencer-based influence and peer-based influence. These constructs were selected to isolate and directly compare digital and in-person

sources of social influence on students' reported clothing-related decision-making. Influencer influence was operationalized through responses to questions measuring exposure to clothing haul content and trust in social media influencers. Peer influence was operationalized through responses measuring peer visibility, peer-based fashion opinions, and the likelihood of purchasing clothing after observing peers wear certain items. Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) were used because they provide a standardized method for quantifying subjective attitudes, allowing for comparison across participants. This format is widely used in social science research to measure perceptions, opinions, and behavioral tendencies. A scenario-based question was included to assess decision-making when influencer and peer influences directly conflicted, providing insight into how participants prioritize social input under competing pressures. A final multiple-choice question measured perceived primary sources of fashion-related pressure.

Procedure

Data were collected through a voluntary and anonymous online survey distributed via Google Forms. The survey included a consent page, demographic questions, Likert-scale items, a scenario-based question, and a final question regarding perceived fashion pressure. Participants first provided informed consent before proceeding to demographic questions. They then completed Likert-scale items measuring influencer and peer influence, followed by the scenario-based question to evaluate responses under conflicting social influence conditions. Finally, participants identified their primary perceived source of fashion pressure. All responses were automatically submitted and securely stored in a password-protected database. Only completed and consented responses were included in the final dataset.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistical methods to identify patterns in participant responses. Percentage distributions were calculated for each survey question and used to construct visual representations, including bar graphs and pie charts, to illustrate response trends across participants. Mean (average) scores were calculated for each Likert-scale item to allow for comparison of the strength of influencer-based and peer-based influence. Additionally, composite influence scores were created by averaging relevant influencer-related items and peer-related items, enabling a direct comparison of overall influence between the two variables. These composite scores were used in Figure 5 to compare overall influencer versus peer influence. Frequency distributions were also used to analyze responses to the scenario-based question and the perceived pressure question, providing insight into how participants respond under conditions of social conflict and where they experience the greatest pressure to conform. Because the same participants provided responses to both the influencer-related and peer-related items, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the two composite scores. This paired nonparametric test was used to compare participants' reported levels of influencer and peer influence while accounting for the fact that both measurements came from the same participants. For the scenario-based question, responses were grouped into three categories for presentation: responses of 1–2 were classified as "No," a response of 3 was classified as "Unsure," and responses of 4–5 were classified as "Yes."

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation, and all responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time before submission. Data were securely stored in a password-protected system.

RESULTS

Overall, the results indicate a distinction between exposure to trends and students' reported clothing-related decision-making, with influencer content playing a more moderate role and peer influence showing a stronger reported influence within this sample. Data from 104 high school students was analyzed to examine the relative influence of digital influencer "haul" culture and peer-based social environments on clothing purchasing behavior.

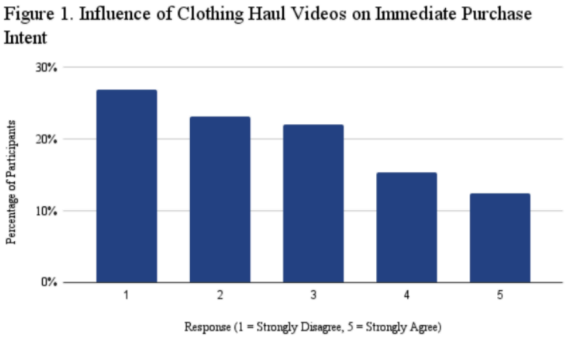


Figure 1. Influence of Clothing Haul Videos on Immediate Purchase Intent. Note. Percentages represent response distribution (n = 104).

Influencer-Based Influence

Participants reported relatively low levels of immediate purchasing intention in response to influencer haul content. When asked whether viewing a clothing haul made them want to purchase items immediately, a majority of respondents (50%) selected either "strongly disagree" (26.9%) or "disagree" (23.1%), while only 27.9% selected "agree" or "strongly agree," and 22.1% remained neutral (Figure 1). This distribution suggests that although haul content is a prominent feature of adolescent digital environments, its influence does not consistently translate into reported purchasing intention. Instead, influencer content appears to function more as a source of exposure to trends rather than a direct driver of purchasing behavior.

Peer-Based Influence

In contrast, peer-based purchasing influence demonstrated a more context-dependent but slightly stronger effect. When asked whether they were more likely to buy clothing after seeing a peer wear it, responses were more evenly distributed, with 29.8% selecting "agree" or "strongly agree," compared to 38.4% who selected "disagree" and 31.7% who remained neutral (Figure 2). Although this does not indicate overwhelming agreement, the distribution is less skewed toward disagreement than influencer-driven purchasing, suggesting that peer influence plays a more active role in

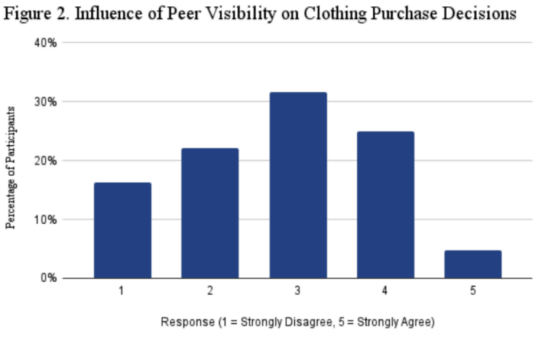


Figure 2. Influence of Peer Visibility on Clothing Purchase Decisions. Note. Percentages represent response distribution (n = 104).

shaping reported clothing-related decisions within specific social contexts.

Comparison of Opinion Influence

To directly compare perceived credibility, mean Likert-scale responses were calculated for both influencer trust and peer opinion value (Figure 3). Participants reported a higher average level of agreement when evaluating peer opinions (M ≈ 3.56) compared to influencer trust (M ≈ 2.90). This difference indicates a clear "trust gap" between the two sources of influence. While responses toward influencers remain relatively neutral overall, peer opinions are more consistently viewed as credible. The mean comparison shown in Figure 3 reinforces that peers are perceived as a more reliable and influential source of fashion guidance.

Figure 3. Comparison of Participant Trust in Social Media Influencers vs Peer Fashion Opinions

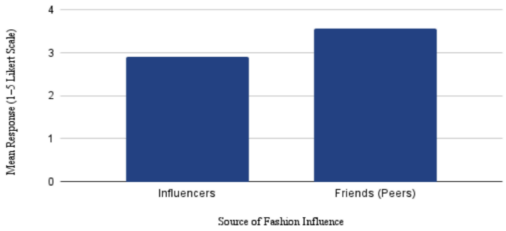
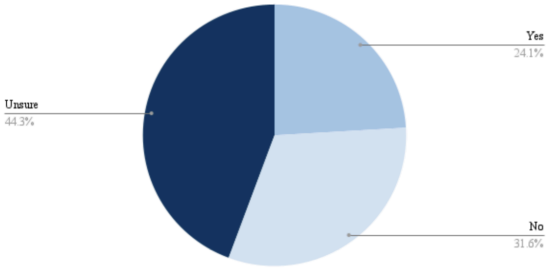


Figure 3. Comparison of participant trust in social media influencers versus peer fashion opinions.
Note. Values represent mean Likert-scale responses (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; n = 104).

Figure 4. Distribution of Respondents' Reported Primary Source of Fashion Pressure



Conflict Between Influences

The difference between influencer and peer influence becomes more apparent when the two are placed in direct conflict. When asked whether they would wear a trend promoted by an influencer if their friends perceived it negatively, only 24% of participants responded "yes," while 31.7% responded "no" and 44.2% selected "unsure" (Figure 4). Combined, 76% of participants either rejected the trend or expressed hesitation, suggesting that peer opinions function as a limiting factor on influencer-driven behavior. This pattern indicates that even when digital influence introduces a trend, peer approval may play an important role in whether it is adopted.

Perceived Sources of Pressure and Overall Influence

Participants' perceptions of social pressure further reinforce the dominance of peer influence. A majority of respondents (57.4%) identified school or peer environments as the primary source of pressure to stay "on trend," compared to only 5% who identified social media as the primary source, while 37.6% selected both. This trend is supported by the composite mean comparison shown in Figure 5, where peer influence (M ≈ 3.18) exceeds influencer influence (M ≈ 2.77). This difference indicates that, on average, participants reported stronger agreement with peer-related influence measures than influencer-related measures.

Figure 5. Overall Comparative Influence of Peers and Social Media Influencers on Fashion Decision-Making

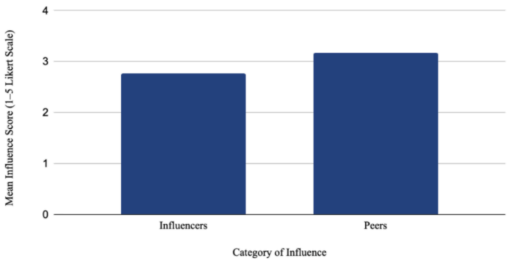


Figure 5. Comparison of composite mean influence scores for peers and social media influencers on student fashion decisions.
Note. Values represent composite mean influence scores derived by averaging behavioral and attitudinal Likert-scale measures for each category (n = 104).

To determine whether this difference was statistically significant, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted using the paired composite scores of the same participants. The test indicated that peer influence scores were significantly higher than influencer influence scores, $W = 2759$, $p < .001$, with a rank-biserial correlation of approximately .41. This result provides statistical support for the observed difference between peer and influencer influence within the sample.

Together, these findings suggest that while digital platforms introduce and circulate trends, peer environments may play a stronger role in determining whether those trends are adopted within this sample.

Summary of Findings

Across the measures examined, peer-related factors generally showed stronger reported influence than influencer-related factors, particularly in situations where digital and in-person influences conflicted. Although influencer content remains highly visible, its impact is moderated by mixed levels of trust and limited behavioral follow-through.

DISCUSSION

The findings support the hypothesis that peer recommendations have a stronger influence on high school students' reported clothing purchasing decisions than digital influencer haul culture. The peer composite score ($M = 3.18$) was higher than the influencer composite score ($M = 2.77$), and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($W = 2759$, $p < .001$). The rank-biserial correlation of approximately .41 further indicates a meaningful difference between the two forms of reported influence. Together, these findings suggest that, within this sample, students reported greater influence from their peers than from digital influencers when making clothing-related decisions. The purpose of this study was to examine the relative influence of digital influencer "haul" culture and localized peer environments on the clothing purchasing behaviors of high school students. Specifically, this study aimed to determine whether influencer-driven exposure or peer-based social dynamics played a greater role in shaping students' reported clothing-related decision-making. These findings should be interpreted in terms of relative influence rather than isolated effects of each factor. By analyzing self-reported behavioral intent, perceived credibility, and sources of social pressure, this study provides insight into how adolescents navigate overlapping digital and in-person influences. The results support the study's hypothesis that while influencer 'haul' culture contributes to trend awareness, peer influence appears to have a stronger effect on students' reported clothing-related decision-making. Across multiple measures—including purchasing intent, trust, and perceived pressure—peer-related variables consistently demonstrated higher levels of influence than influencer-based factors. This suggests that, within this sample, adolescent consumer decision-making may follow a layered process in which digital exposure introduces trends, while peer environments may play a stronger role in students' reported clothing-related decisions. These findings partially align with existing research on influencer marketing and parasocial relationships. Prior studies have shown that adolescents often perceive influencers as relatable and trustworthy, which can increase purchase intention and materialistic attitudes (Lou and Kim; De Veirman

et al.). While this study supports the idea that influencers contribute to awareness and initial interest, the relatively low levels of immediate purchasing intent suggest that this influence may not be as behaviorally powerful as previously assumed. The neutral distribution of trust in influencers further reinforces this limitation, indicating that adolescents do not universally accept influencer recommendations as credible.

In contrast, the stronger influence of peers aligns closely with research on normative social influence and adolescent development. Prinstein and Dodge emphasize that adolescents are highly sensitive to peer approval, often prioritizing social acceptance over personal preference. The findings of this study extend this concept by suggesting that peer influence may shape students' reported clothing-related decision-making. The higher mean scores for peer opinion credibility and the dominance of peer-related social pressure suggest that adolescents rely more heavily on their immediate social environments when making reported clothing-related decisions. This supports Berger and Heath's argument that clothing functions as a social signal, where individuals use consumption to communicate identity and group belonging. The conflict scenario provides particularly strong evidence for the interaction between these two forms of influence. When participants were asked whether they would wear an influencer-promoted trend that was negatively perceived by their peers, the majority either rejected the trend or expressed uncertainty. This indicates that peer groups may function as a "filter" for digital influence. This finding directly addresses the research gap identified in the literature by suggesting that digital and peer influences do not operate independently, but may instead interact in a layered manner. Additionally, the distribution of perceived social pressure highlights the importance of physical social environments in shaping behavior. While social media plays a central role in circulating trends, the school environment represents a space where clothing choices are immediately visible and subject to evaluation. This real-time visibility increases the social consequences of clothing decisions, making peer approval a more immediate and influential factor. As a result, even highly visible digital trends may be disregarded if they do not align with the norms of a student's peer group.

Limitations

Despite these findings, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the use of convenience sampling from a single high school restricts the generalizability of the findings. Peer dynamics and social norms vary considerably across school communities, and Eastport South Manor Junior-Senior High School—a suburban Long Island campus—may reflect stronger conformity pressures than schools in more urban or socioeconomically diverse environments, potentially inflating the observed dominance of peer influence. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces response bias, as adolescents may underreport the extent to which influencer content shapes their behavior due to social desirability concerns — that is, students may be reluctant to admit that online content affects their purchasing decisions when peer relationships feel more socially legitimate to acknowledge. This means the study may systematically underestimate influencer influence rather than simply introduce random error. Third, the survey measured perceived behavioral intent and attitudes rather than actual purchasing behavior, and the two do not always align; a student may report that peer opinion matters more while still completing an influencer-driven purchase independently. Finally, while the composite influence scores enabled a direct comparison between the two variables, the survey instrument was not adapted from a

previously validated scale, which limits confidence in whether the Likert items accurately and consistently captured the constructs of influencer-based and peer-based influence as defined. Future research could build upon the present analysis by using additional inferential methods to examine potential relationships between demographic or contextual factors and students' reported levels of influencer and peer influence.

Additionally, the difference between peer and influencer composite scores should be interpreted with consideration of how the survey measured each form of influence. Although both composites were designed to capture social influence on clothing-related decisions, the individual questions were not identical in wording or context. The influencer items addressed immediate purchasing responses to haul content and trust in influencer advice, whereas the peer items addressed purchasing after observing classmates and the value placed on friends' fashion opinions. Therefore, the statistically significant difference between the composite scores should be interpreted as evidence of greater reported peer-related influence within this sample rather than definitive evidence that peers are universally more influential than digital influencers. Other contextual factors, including students' existing relationships with their peers, the visibility of trends within the school environment, and differences in how students perceive online versus in-person influence, may also have contributed to the observed results.

Implications

The findings of this study have several broader implications for understanding adolescent consumer behavior in digitally saturated environments. The findings suggest that despite the global reach of social media, localized peer environments may represent a stronger source of influence on students' reported clothing-related decisions. This challenges the assumption that influencers have overtaken traditional forms of social influence and highlights the continued importance of in-person social dynamics. The results suggest that influencer marketing alone may not be sufficient to strongly influence students' reported clothing-related decisions. While influencers successfully introduce trends and generate interest, adoption may be influenced by peer validation. This suggests that marketing efforts relying solely on digital promotion may overlook the critical role of peer group acceptance in influencing consumer outcomes. Additionally, these findings have implications for understanding how trends spread within adolescent populations. Rather than moving directly from influencer to individual, trends may follow a layered pattern of influence, where digital exposure is followed by peer-level evaluation of those trends. This layered process may help explain why some trends gain traction within specific schools or social groups while others do not. More broadly, this study contributes to larger discussions about adolescent decision-making by highlighting the tension between global digital culture and localized social expectations. Adolescents are not passive consumers of media; instead, they actively evaluate and negotiate competing influences. This suggests that interventions aimed at promoting more mindful consumption may benefit from focusing on peer group norms in addition to digital literacy.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relative influence of digital influencer "haul" culture and localized peer environments on the clothing purchasing behaviors of high school students. The findings indicate that while influencer content plays a meaningful role in introducing trends and shaping initial interest, peer influence appears to have a stronger impact on students' reported clothing-related decision-making. Across measures of behavioral intent, perceived credibility, and social pressure, peer environments consistently emerged as the more influential factor, particularly in situations where digital and in-person influences conflicted. These results suggest that adolescent consumer behavior is best understood as a layered process rather than a single-source influence. Digital platforms contribute to trend visibility and awareness, while students' responses to those trends may be more strongly influenced by immediate social environments where choices are publicly visible and socially evaluated. In this way, peer influence may serve as an important social filter through which adolescents evaluate and respond to emerging trends. In directly comparing these two forms of influence, this study helps address a gap in existing research that has largely examined digital and peer effects separately. The findings suggest that these influences do not operate independently, but may instead interact in a layered manner. This provides a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents navigate competing social pressures in an increasingly interconnected environment. This may challenge assumptions about the relative influence of digital and traditional social influences and highlights the continued importance of in-person social dynamics. As a result, understanding youth consumer behavior requires not only attention to digital trends but also careful consideration of the peer contexts in which adolescents evaluate and respond to those trends

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research should build on these findings by addressing the limitations identified above. Most immediately, studies incorporating more diverse and geographically varied populations—across multiple schools, regions, and socioeconomic backgrounds—would improve the generalizability of the observed patterns and allow researchers to examine whether peer influence is similarly strong in settings with different social structures. Because this study relied on self-reported behavioral intent, future research would also benefit from incorporating behavioral tracking methods, such as purchase history data or longitudinal diary studies, to capture real-world decision-making more accurately than surveys allow. Additionally, future studies could examine how individual-level variables, including socioeconomic status, gender identity, and frequency of social media use, moderate the relationship between influencer exposure and peer influence, as these factors likely shape how adolescents weigh competing social inputs. Investigating different types of influencers (e.g., micro-influencers with smaller, highly engaged audiences versus macro-influencers with broad reach) would also be valuable, as the credibility and parasocial closeness associated with micro-influencers may produce stronger purchasing behavior than the more distant celebrity-style influencers this study did not distinguish between. Finally, experimental or quasi-experimental designs could help establish causality between specific types of social influence and purchasing outcomes, moving beyond the correlational limitations inherent to survey-based research.

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument

AP Research Survey (Social Influence on Adolescent Fashion Choices)
This survey is for an AP Research project regarding the factors that influence high school fashion. Your participation is voluntary, and all responses are completely anonymous. You may exit the survey at any time.

Consent

1. Do you consent to participate? (All responses are anonymous)

Mark only one.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Participant Background

1. Current Grade Level

Mark only one.

- ☐ 9th
- ☐ 10th
- ☐ 11th
- ☐ 12th

2. On average, how much time do you spend on fashion-related social media?

Mark only one.

- ☐ 0-2 Hours
- ☐ 3-5 Hours
- ☐ 6+ Hours

Digital Influence & "Haul" Culture
Please answer the following based on your interactions with style influencers, "Get Ready With Me" (GRWM) videos, and clothing hauls on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

1. Seeing a "clothing haul" video makes me want to purchase the items shown immediately.
Mark only one.
- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3 (Neutral)
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

2. I trust the style advice of social media influencers more than that of traditional clothing brands advertisements.
Mark only one.
- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3 (Neutral)
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

Localized Peer Influence & Social Proof
These questions focus on the influence of your immediate physical environment, specifically the styles and opinions of your peers and friends at school.

1. I am more likely to buy an item of clothing if I have seen a student at my school wearing it first.
Mark only one.
- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3 (Neutral)
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

2. I value the fashion opinions of my friends more than the opinions of social media influencers.
Mark only one.
- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2

- ☐ 3 (Neutral)
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

Comparative Influence Scenarios

The following scenarios ask you to choose between digital trends and peer opinions to determine which factor has a greater impact on your final purchasing decisions?

1. If a trending influencer wears a style but your closest friends at school think it looks "bad," would you still wear it?

Mark only one.

- ☐ 1 (Strongly Disagree)
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3 (Neutral)
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 (Strongly Agree)

2. Where do you feel the most pressure to stay "on trend"?

Mark only one.

- ☐ Online/Social Media
- ☐ In School/With Peers
- ☐ Both Equally