



IDENTITY



Is social media stealing our style?

BY JULIA SEIDI

THEFT



Vetements
Frankenstein jeans

I RECENTLY TRIED ON A PAIR

of “Frankenstein” jeans. Their high waist and uneven, frayed hem horrified my husband, who managed to mutter “mom jeans” under a fake cough while slowly shaking his head when I emerged from the change room. Despite his less-than-enthusiastic reaction, I still bought them—partly because I liked them and partly because Instagram told me to. Let me rephrase that: I have free will and I am capable of making my own decisions; however, after months of scrolling through my feed and seeing pic after pic of my style crushes Miroslava Duma and Eva Chen wearing versions of the polarizing denim, I wanted a pair too.

Social media’s echo chamber is real, says Bhupesh Shah, professor and coordinator of the social-media program at Toronto’s Seneca College, noting that even though we have access to 2.8 billion social-media users around the world, we tend to gravitate toward the feeds of like-minded individuals. “If you’re in an echo chamber,

87%
of influencers look to their social-media feeds to inform their purchasing decisions.

what’s reverberating is going to influence the way you think,” he says. Sounds obvious, but by sharing and liking similar posts, our tastes, ideas and beliefs are reinforced through repetition, consequently creating a social bubble. My feed is the textbook definition of said bubble: I mainly follow folks in the fashion industry known for pushing the sartorial envelope. This means I’m disproportionately exposed to super-stylized images and not-so-mainstream trends that, after seeing them over and over again, suddenly start to look and feel, well, normal. Case in point: the Vetements Frankenstein jeans, which debuted on the label’s spring/summer 2015 runway. Initially, I wasn’t blown away, yet they now hang in my closet. Coveting a pair of admittedly fashionable but questionably flattering jeans isn’t

so far-fetched when it feels like almost every person in my feed has a pair.

I’m not the only one letting social media make my style decisions. A recent survey by Instagram analytics platform Dash Hudson revealed that 87 percent of influencers look to their social-media feeds to inform their purchasing decisions. And one-third of Instagram users have bought a piece of clothing they first peeped while surfing the social-networking app. By relying on our screens and the passive act of scrolling instead of actively searching for new wardrobe ideas, we may be limiting our creativity and style intuition. If we are all just emulating one another, do we run the risk of losing our personal sense of style or, worse, becoming fashion clones?

The technology behind certain social-media platforms makes it even easier to stay in our bubble. “Algorithms look at the things you’ve clicked on in the past and, based on that, recommend new things to you,” says Alex

Krasodomski-Jones, a researcher at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at the U.K.-based think tank Demos. We leave behind a trail of data “bread crumbs” every time we “heart” a Gucci Marmont bag or give Kylie Jenner’s latest lip kit the thumbs-up. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook use this data to personalize our feeds and tailor the type of content we see to reflect our past preferences, which amplifies it all. Differing ideas, styles and viewpoints often get filtered out. Algorithms also tend to favour the loudest voices—that is, posts with the most likes. The more popular a post, the more often it appears on a feed with likes begetting likes. Depending on its marketing strategy, a brand can either win big or lose big on social.

It’s not only who we’re seeing online that is affected; it’s also the type of trend. ▷



PRODUCT PLACEMENT

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT #SPONSORED CONTENT

Trends have always been started by those in the spotlight. Think of high school: If the cool girls are wearing T-shirts with two holes cut out of the chest (*Mean Girls*, anyone?), it’s only a matter of time before their admirers make a date with a Gap basic tee and a pair of scissors. Back in the day when television set the trends, we credited (er, cursed?) *The Simple Life* stars Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie for making velour track suits a thing. The screen size may have changed, but the trickle-down effect is the same.

The big difference is advertising dollars. Your school’s Queen B wasn’t getting paid to sport a Von Dutch trucker hat—she truly liked it (or at least she thought she did). And in the early days of social media, we liked and followed based on an authentic appreciation of someone’s personal sense of style. Now, sponsored posts are an influencer’s bread and butter, often commanding price tags from \$1,000 for more modest influencers to six figures if your last name is Kardashian or Jenner. Shop-my-feed apps like Snapppt and Like to Know It offer more revenue potential for style stars who earn a commission on items sold. Do hefty paycheques impact the genuine endorsement of a product? “I want to believe that no matter what the brand is or how much money it has, if it’s not a fit, it’s not going to earn that place in your feed,” says Toronto-based blogger and Instagram influencer Krystin Lee, who also works as a social-media strategist for



Minimalism seems to have no place in the age of the selfie. “Peacocking,” or posing in over-the-top pieces, gets maximum attention. Calgary-based style blogger and Instagram star Ania Boniecka, who has 113,000 followers and climbing, treats her posts like a magazine editorial and seeks out items that she knows will photograph the best. “If it’s just a plain outfit, like a T-shirt and jeans, to me it’s boring,” she says. Fashion designers have started to recognize this vivid medium and are responding to it. “Sometimes, I have to admit, as a designer, you get into this trap of thinking about clothes for a picture rather than what’s going to go into the market or showroom,” Alexander Wang told *The New York Times* in 2014. Or, as Jeremy Scott succinctly put it in *The New Yorker*: “You only have a screen that is this big [the average smartphone is about 12 centimetres] to make an impression.”

1/3
of Instagram users have bought a piece of clothing they first peeped while surfing the social-networking app.

Making that impression doesn’t mean you need to rethink your style to be more Moschino than minimalist; nor do you have to burst your social bubble just yet. If our understanding and interpretation of fashion is compromised when our scope is limited, we simply need to let a little air in. “It’s a good feeling to find people who agree with us,” says Krasodomski-Jones. “The problem is when you aren’t conscious of the fact that your world view is being narrowed.” Shah suggests conducting your searches using more general hashtags—like #ootd and #streetstyle—instead of specific trends or brands. Follow people you disagree with (this is known as “hate-following”) or those whose style is a far cry from your own. This will not only open your eyes to new ideas and trends but also keep those algorithms guessing.

As for me, I admit it feels quite cozy inside both my bubble and my Frankensteins. But I now know who created them. The next time I go shopping, it won’t be my screen (or my husband) that offers me validation. I’m going with my gut. □

a marketing company. “[But] for a lot of people, this is their income now, and I do think that changes things.”

New guidelines introduced this year by Advertising Standards Canada mean that Canadian social-media stars must clearly state if a post is a sponsored advertisement through a hashtag like #sp or #ad. But in a string of 10 hashtags, it’s an easy one for followers to miss. And since the guidelines differ from country to country, not all influencers are subject to the same declaration rules. If how we dress and what we buy is affected by what we see in our feed, understanding the motivation behind a post—whether someone is being paid to wear it or whether they sincerely love their new Balenciaga-inspired sock boots—is crucial, especially when many women’s identities are so closely intertwined with what’s in our #closet.

ALL OF THE LIKES

FIVE FASHION TRENDS THAT STARTED ON INSTAGRAM.



FRAYED-HEM JEANS

Jeans are everywhere on Insta—at last count, there were over nine million “denim” hashtags. But if fashion were to have a pet right now, it would be the frayed-hem jeans in all their ripped insouciance.



SCARVES

Let’s be real. Before fashion bloggers were tying scarves around their necks (or their wrists or purse straps), the last time you thought about this accessory was probably while watching Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*.



OFF-THE-SHOULDER

Technically, this peekaboo trend started on the runways a few years back, with designers from Givenchy to Adam Lippes showcasing bare shoulders, but it has since been adopted for so many #ootd pix.



FISHNETS

Fishnets have a long (and fancy) history. But the Insta-approved way to wear them is more casual than couture. Pair them with your Stan Smiths, under those ubiquitous frayed-hem jeans or sock-style with midi or kitten heels.



THE ARK BAG

Like Mansur Gavriel’s before it, Cult Gaia’s feed has become the gateway to the promised land of It bags. The go-to for ‘grammers is the bamboo “Gaia’s Ark” tote, which we’ve officially declared the purse of the summer.

“ALL OF THE LIKES”; CARLI WHITWELL; PHOTOGRAPHY; IMAXTREE (STREET STYLE) & GETTY IMAGES (SIDEBAR STREET STYLE & YELLOW SQUARES)