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The Impact of Fashion on Mental Health: An Empirical Analysis on Generation Z

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A B S T R A C T

The relationship between fashion and mental health has gained increasing attention in contemporary research, particularly among younger generations. This article explores the impact of fashion on mental health, focusing on Generation Z—an age group known for its digital presence, social consciousness and evolving perceptions of identity. The study aims to analyse how fashion choices influence self-esteem, confidence, mood and overall psychological well-being. Clothing is a part of our existence. They also serve as an external representation of the individual's values, interests, and attitude. They show who we are and how we're feeling.

Primary data was gathered using a mixed methods approach by interviewing and surveying participants between the ages of 18 and 25. The results show that fashion is a tool for emotional regulation as well as a means of self-expression, enabling people to match their external appearance with their innermost beings. The research also looks at the negative impacts of fashion trends, such as body image issues, fast fashion consumerism, and social pressure, all of which can make stress and anxiety greater.

This study concludes that while fashion significantly contributes to positive mental health outcomes through self-expression and social belonging, it also demands a critical examination of its negative psychological effects. Recommendations include promoting sustainable and inclusive fashion practices to foster mental well-being among Generation Z.

Keywords: Fashion, Mental Health, Generation Z, Emotional Well-being, Digital Culture

1. Introduction

Mental health is a significant challenge among Generation Z individuals, who continue to analyse a variety of methods to mitigate mental health challenges (Takács et al., 2021). Mattei (2019) identified a significant relationship between mental health complications and fashion choices among the participants. The physical appearance of an individual and the choices they make towards their wardrobe play an imperative role in the patient's mental stability. In modernised society, the expression of an individual is categorised by their appearance, while the appearance is formed through their wardrobe. Therefore, mental health is found to be primarily impacted by the inclusion of fashion in modernised society. In this research, fashion was investigated through a focused approach to the mental health of Generation Z individuals to ensure the effectiveness of the fashion framework in contributing to the overall well-being of mental health.

Generation Z, comprising individuals aged 12 to 27, plays a vital role in societal sustainability. This legion's daily routines are inextricably linked to technological advancements and social media platforms. For Generation Z, social networking sites function as crucial hubs for information distribution that becoming an essential component of their everyday existence. Fashion plays a particularly significant role due to their unique characteristics and the cultural, social, and technological environment they inhabit. It is evident that social media presence serves as a platform for showcasing one's identity, including through fashion. Whereas clothing used to serve a need, it is now increasingly becoming a desire.

Fashion is more than just clothes; it's also about the role and significance of clothes in social action. In fact, fashion can be thought of as a social skin that conveys the lifestyles and messages of a particular community, which is also a part of social life.

2. Literature Review

Social media has played an imperative role in amplifying the fashion requirements in society (Fetais et al., 2023). Influencer marketing has enhanced the value of clothing in society, resulting in increased acceptability of fast-fashion trends and other attributes related to the fashion industry. Furthermore, Sulthana (2022) highlighted that the paid-advertisement strategies, search engine optimisation, engagement boosts, and pay-per-click methods have materialised the expansion of profit strategies for fashion companies, resulting in increased competition. From consumers' perspectives, the inclusion of

higher visibility of fashion has resulted in internal societal competition to achieve the best fashion practices, which has been an integral aspect of the mental health of active society participants.

Traditionally, Atik et al. (2023) stated that separating wardrobe from formal and informal clothes instigated the value of modernised fashion. Since fast fashion is readily integrated into society, consumers continue to delve deep into modifying their wardrobe despite optimising their previous purchases, resulting in mental health complications or their ability to be influenced by a marketing campaign. As a result, Generation Z continues to struggle with mental health complications when they cannot cope with the latest fashion trends, resulting in a sense of marginalisation or not being an active part of society. Furthermore, social gatherings have also instigated the newest fashion trend as an "interesting" topic for discussion, which enhances the value of the latest fashion trends in consumers' minds and challenges self-identity formation.

Manchiraju and Sadachar (2020) identified that traditional fashion marketing campaigns featured models with idealised physical appearances in pursuit of their consumers with diversified body images. However, in the modernised environment, fashion companies prefer diversity in models to ensure communication of the actual quality of the product rather than perceived quality. Therefore, people with different body images can theoretically understand what their subsequent purchases may look like. However, consumers with idealised body image continue to inflict debate on the perception developed by fashion companies, resulting in unnecessary comparison, which adds to the mental pressure and disintegration of the individuals.

Bjerre (2022) stated that Generation Z individuals are actively keen on incorporating opinions about individuals based on their physical appearance, resulting in significant challenges for them. Capitalism and discrimination based on the income class of individuals have taken a considerable toll on the psychological well-being of the population as affordability is extensively dynamic for the latest fashion trends, resulting in compromised behaviour from the market. Contrarily, Valderrama (2023) also identified that the inclusion of ethical fashion with sustainability has also increased the concern among Generation Z individuals due to the high environmental cost of the fast fashion industry. Therefore, modernised consumer behaviour is not aligned with the mental health complications faced by individuals in the market (Parsons et al., 2023).

3. Research Aim and Objectives

The research investigates fashion's impact on mental health, particularly from Generation Z, aged 12 to 27, in 2024. The aim prioritises the influence of social media technological advancements on fashion choices, self-perception, and psychological well-being of Generation Z. Thus, the following objectives were incorporated for the completion of the research:

- Examine the role of social media in influencing fashion choices and its psychological impact on individuals from Generation Z.

- Analyse the role of self-identity formation through fashion consumption among Generation Z customers.

- Highlight the fashion-related social comparisons that persist within society and identify mental health complications that occur subsequently.

- Explore the psychological aspects of fashion consumption, including self-expression, confidence, and a sense of belonging among Generation Z.

- Analyse the role of ethical fashion choices (sustainable fashion) in influencing the mental well-being of an individual.

4. Methodology

The research incorporated primary research methodology, which included 80 participants. The participants were randomly selected based on their categorisation of Generation Z. A survey questionnaire was distributed online to the participants, addressing the primary research questions for this study. As a result, the inclusion of a survey questionnaire enabled the study to investigate the mental well-being and fashion criteria among Generation Z. The study incorporated 30 questions for the participants and understood their respective demography by incorporating gender, occupation and income class. It enabled the research to integrate an extensive understanding of the perception of individuals regarding clothing and its influence on mental health. The following hypotheses were incorporated for the completion of the study:

- H1: Social media has a significant influence on fashion choices among Generation Z, with positive and negative psychological outcomes

- H2: Fashion consumption plays a critical role in the self-identity formation of Generation Z

- H3: Fashion-related social comparison among Generation Z individuals leads to adverse mental health outcomes

- H4: Fashion consumption positively influences the psychological well-being of Generation Z

- H5: Making ethical fashion choices improves the mental well-being of Generation Z by reducing guilt
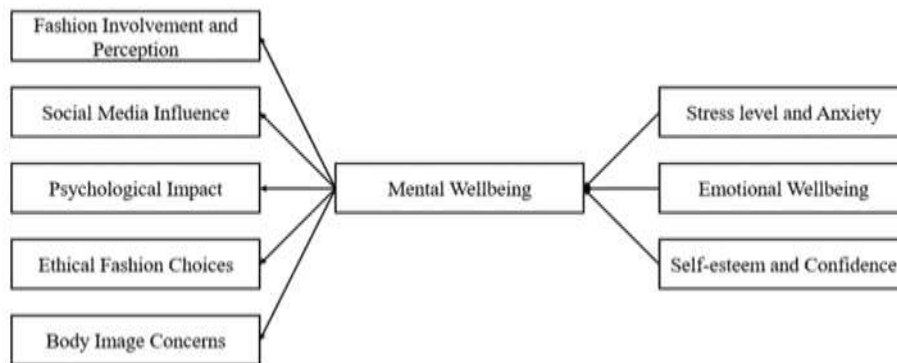
4.1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Author, 2025)

The figure above showcases the conceptual framework where the fashion industry consumers have highlighted the influence of fashion involvement and social media influence as the primary drivers for purchase in the industry (Dabas and Whang, 2022). Furthermore, psychological impacts, including the need to purchase new fashion products and ethical fashion concerns, are also identified as drivers in the industry. Contrarily, Shafqat et al. (2023) stated that the fast-fashion industry has capitalised on body image concerns of individuals where the prevalent debates include body-shaming as well; therefore, consumers are inclined towards mitigation of arguments through fashion products that enable them to hide or highlight features of their body according to their choice which has an impact on the mental well-being of the consumers. Similarly, mental well-being comprises factors including stress level, anxiety, emotional well-being and self-esteem of individuals (Dragolea et al., 2023).

5. Results

The following table showcases the inclusion of age distribution of the sample size incorporated in this research:

5.1. What is your age range?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-20	1	1.3	1.3	1.3
	21-23	45	56.3	56.3	57.5
	24-26	31	38.8	38.8	96.3
	27 and above	3	3.8	3.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Since the expenditure of fashion is dependent on the income or monthly expenditure of an individual, the study incorporated the expenditure distribution of participants as well since the majority of the Generation Z participants were students:

5.2. Please mention your monthly expenditures.

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Below 20000	32	40.0	40.0	40.0
	20000 – 25000	23	28.7	28.7	68.8
	25000 – 30000	11	13.8	13.8	82.5
	30000 And Above	14	17.5	17.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

The following tables include the responses from the participants based on the frequency which were used for analysis in this research:

5.3. How frequently do you go shopping for clothes?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Monthly	44	55.0	55.0	55.0
	Half-yearly	20	25.0	25.0	80.0
	Half-yearly	7	8.8	8.8	88.8
	Yearly	3	3.8	3.8	92.5
	Rarely	6	7.5	7.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.4. What type of fashion influences you the most?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Casual wear	47	58.8	58.8	58.8
	Streetwear	3	3.8	3.8	62.5
	Sustainable/Eco-friendly	13	16.3	16.3	78.8
	High-end/Designer	4	5.0	5.0	83.8
	Traditional wear	12	15.0	15.0	98.8
	Fusion wear	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.5. Which of the following motivates your fashion choices the most?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Personal comfort	55	68.8	68.8	68.8
	Cultural values	6	7.5	7.5	76.3
	Social trends	3	3.8	3.8	80.0
	Fashion trends	16	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.6. How important is clothing to your daily routine?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very important	65	81.3	81.3	81.3
	Moderately important	12	15.0	15.0	96.3
	Not important	3	3.8	3.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.7. Do you believe your fashion choice affects your mood or confidence?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	77	96.3	96.3	96.3
	No	3	3.8	3.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.8. Do you consider fashion a part of a healthy lifestyle?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	67	83.8	83.8	83.8
	No	3	3.8	3.8	87.5
	Not sure	10	12.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.9. How often does fashion play a role in reducing your stress levels?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	42	52.5	52.5	52.5
	Often	19	23.8	23.8	76.3
	Sometimes	17	21.3	21.3	97.5
	Rarely	2	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.10. What factors influence your clothing choices the most? (Select all that apply)

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Comfort	31	38.8	38.8	38.8
	Style and trends	13	16.3	16.3	55.0
	Colours	17	21.3	21.3	76.3
	Materials	13	16.3	16.3	92.5
	Cultural or personal identity	6	7.5	7.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.11. Do you believe sustainable or ethical fashion choices impact mental well-being positively?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Highly Satisfied	23	28.7	28.7	28.7
	Satisfied	40	50.0	50.0	78.8
	Neutral	15	18.8	18.8	97.5
	Highly dissatisfied	2	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.12. Are your fashion choices influenced by social media or contemporary trends?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes, heavily	28	35.0	35.0	35.0
	Yes, moderately	41	51.2	51.2	86.3
	No	11	13.8	13.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.13. Do you think using fashion as a psychological tool could improve mental health?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	19	23.8	23.8	23.8
	Agree	49	61.3	61.3	85.0
	Neutral	11	13.8	13.8	98.8
	Strongly disagree	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.14. How does wearing fashionable clothing affect your mood?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Positively	28	35.0	35.0	35.0
	Positively	45	56.3	56.3	91.3
	Natural	6	7.5	7.5	98.8
	Negatively	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.15. Do the clothing's materials impact your emotional state?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes, heavily	41	51.2	51.2	51.2
	Yes, moderately	31	38.8	38.8	90.0
	No	8	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.16. Do you associate specific colours in clothing with particular emotions (e.g., blue for calmness)?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	73	91.3	91.3	91.3
	No	7	8.8	8.8	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.17. Have you ever experienced anxiety or stress because of your fashion choices?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes, frequently	26	32.5	32.5	32.5
	Yes, occasionally	34	42.5	42.5	75.0
	No	20	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.18. Do you believe that certain clothing types can influence your health (e.g., posture, movement, skin health)?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	71	88.8	88.8	88.8
	No	9	11.3	11.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.19. Do you think that fashion takes precedence over mental health among Generation Z?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	49	61.3	61.3	61.3
	No	6	7.5	7.5	68.8
	Not Sure	25	31.3	31.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.20. Do you feel comfortable wearing fashion that does not align with conventional body standards?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	17	21.3	21.3	21.3
	Agree	25	31.3	31.3	52.5
	Neutral	22	27.5	27.5	80.0
	Disagree	16	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.21. How would you rate the influence of fashion on your self-confidence?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very positive	34	42.5	42.5	42.5
	Positive	40	50.0	50.0	92.5
	Neutral	5	6.3	6.3	98.8
	Negative	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.22. Are you aware of sustainable fashion?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	76	95.0	95.0	95.0
	No	4	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.23. Do you feel guilt or mental stress about purchasing fast fashion?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	20	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Often	18	22.5	22.5	47.5
	Sometimes	27	33.8	33.8	81.3
	Rarely	5	6.3	6.3	87.5
	Never	10	12.5	12.5	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

5.24. Would you prioritise sustainable fashion over trends if given a choice?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	32	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Agree	29	36.3	36.3	76.3
	Neutral	15	18.8	18.8	95.0
	Disagree	4	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	80	100.0	100.0	

6. Discussion

Lisun et al. (2024) stated that social media plays a vital role in shaping consumer preferences in the fashion industry. Furthermore, a similar precedent was observed in the data integrated for this research. From the context developed by Xue et al. (2023), it is analysed that the ability of social media to influence consumer choices highlights the mental well-being involvement in the fashion industry as well, where the consumers are exposed to diversified marketing strategies to affect a change in their preferences through influencer marketing and other methods as well. Contrarily, the psychological pressure observed from the dataset did not reveal significant alignment with social media and the fashion industry as the data set commonly responded that societal pressure and peer pressure required them to update the fashion more often, compared to the marketing strategies incorporated by the brands. Contrarily, Sulthana (2022) stated that influencer marketing also enables a significant sense of inadequacy among individuals, resulting in a compromised approach to mental well-being. A similar precedent was also observed in the dataset for this research.

Most of the study participants stated that an individual's fashion sense fuels self-identity. Liu and Qureshi (2023) also noted that consumers have unanimously incorporated fashion to express themselves in society. For example, the preceding study incorporated diversified colours to identify the theme of an individual's personality. Black can be considered a symbol of solidarity; rainbow colours can symbolise support for diverse communities, and significant associations are made with other colours. However, Chen et al. (2021) argued that using different colours to make a statement is not unanimous and consumers can also incorporate a particular culture based on their personal preference. Therefore, the mental well-being of an individual can be passively associated with the individual's colour preference. However, society views the expression through colours as a significantly important aspect of modernised self-identity formation.

The data confirmed the inclusion of individuals to conform to current trends and societal expectations, which contributed to the added mental pressure. Centobelli et al. (2022) also identified a similar approach to back the fast fashion industry, revealing that the success of the fast fashion industry is the changing trends of fashion, which require the individual to upgrade their wardrobe frequently compared to conventional times. However, the findings oppose the luxury apparel market context, where the purchases made are not aligned with the findings of the fast fashion industry. Therefore, MacGregor and Sani (2023) stated that the income groups with enhanced affordability are migrating towards luxury fashion, then incorporating fast fashion trends to ensure stability in purchases and experience the quality of the products. Similarly, the results from this study indicated that consumers often felt guilty about incorporating fast fashion industry trends due to high environmental costs. Since Generation Z is increasingly concerned about the environment, including fast fashion can be challenged ethically.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is established that the inclusion of the fashion industry extensively impacts mental health and well-being. Fashion has become an integral aspect of societal values regarding expression and identity, resulting in significant measures for consumer behavior. Generation Z, in particular, has been impacted thoroughly by fashion due to the increased accessibility of consumers through social media and societal values. As a result, their mental well-being is readily challenged by their support for fast or ethical fashion and their material preferences. Therefore, there is an increased need to reorganize the values associated with the fashion industry to enhance its overall contribution to the mental well-being of an individual while marginalizing the environmental cost associated with it.

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