

# How Social Media Micro-Influencers Are Disrupting the Business of Youth Fashion

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## *Abstract*

*Recent years have seen a veritable surge in the popularity of social media micro-influencers among the younger generations like Millennials and Generation-Z. These amateur micro-influencers have achieved a modicum of fame through their charismatic appeal and niche expertise, by focusing on a very narrow domain of interest within a large set of product and service categories. The growing popularity of micro-influencers has not escaped the attention of online fashion and streetwear marketers, like Asos, Boohoo, and Fashion Nova, who have coopted them to present their offerings on social platforms, like Instagram, using rich, visually appealing content, often modeled by the influencers themselves. This novel marketing and branding approach is highly cost-effective and obviates the need for traditional and expensive push marketing methods like television advertising and celebrity endorsements. Moreover, some of the micro-influencers themselves are now leveraging their social media popularity to launch their own “private fashion brands” on Instagram. These online developments have gained even greater momentum during the time of the pandemic. All such emerging tactics and trends stand to disrupt many mass-market apparel companies like Gap, Zara and H&M. The paper concludes with a set of managerial implications for practitioners of these established firms.*

Few industries are as susceptible to the fleeting consumer zeitgeist as the business of youth fashion. Fast-changing styles, competitive pricing, sudden and disruptive trends (like athleisure, velour suit, and hoodie), rapid technology changes, together with fickle and exacting customers – all these

make for a heady mix of factors that can have onetime industry leaders outsmarted by nimble rivals that seem to come from nowhere.<sup>1</sup> Consider how brands like Gap, Banana Republic, Express, J. Crew, and Aéropostale were at one time upstaged by “fast fashion” retailers like Zara, H&M, Forever 21, and Uniqlo. Lately Primark has joined the competition and gained a significant share of the market. At the heart of the business model of all such companies is speed-to-market whereby trending styles are brought speedily to stores through a combination of skilled employees, flexible production, limited merchandising, and real-time demand forecasting.

While fast fashion retailers revolutionized both main-street and high-street apparel, they *themselves* are now under threat of disruption from a new crop of online stores that are labeled as “ultra-fast fashion.”<sup>2</sup> With names like ASOS, Boohoo, Fashion Nova, and Missguided, these online fashion sites can be even faster than fast fashion, providing unique and trendy styles in a matter of 2-3 weeks and retailing at very affordable prices.<sup>3</sup> What is noteworthy for practitioners of traditional apparel companies is that these emerging retailers are very much in tune with the exigencies of the present pandemic and the behavioral habits of Millennials and Generation Z through their skillful use of social media micro-influencers in their marketing tactics.<sup>4</sup> We examine the latter aspect in this paper.

### **Role of Micro-influencers in Disrupting Mass-market Fashion**

The youth of today rarely visit malls and physical stores for browsing and buying, as previous generations once did. The global pandemic has accentuated this trend even more. While this may sound like the death knell for traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, it has created opportunities for a wide selection of online and app-based competitors. The youth are “digital natives,” as they are frequently to be found on their smartphones and on various social media sites, particularly those that have rich photo and video content like Instagram.<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, young social media users gravitate toward Instagram and TikTok to be inspired by their favorite micro-influencers whom they devoutly follow.<sup>6</sup> The latter are those amateur young men and women, who meticulously curate their colorful, visually interesting pages and have followers numbering between tens of thousands to a few hundreds of thousands of users.<sup>7</sup> These micro-influencers have achieved a modicum of fame through their charismatic appeal and niche expertise, by focusing on a very specific domain of interest, within such categories as food, travel, beauty, fitness, streetwear, etc. These young men and women have become minor celebrities on the social platforms, and have therefore attracted interest from companies, both big and small.<sup>8</sup>

The remarkable popularity of micro-influencers has also not escaped the attention of nimble online fashion marketers who have coopted them to present their offerings on these platforms using rich, visually appealing photos and videos, usually modeled by the micro-influencers themselves. A mere liking of their posts can readily translate into sales for these companies, since most of these social platforms provide seamless “Buy” buttons, whereby consumers can act upon anything they see that they like. Even though the interaction between the brand and users is brief and conducted solely through images, it can be quite effective in persuading them to make a purchase. For these younger, tech-savvy consumers a picture is literally worth a thousand words, as they tend not to process verbal information as much as earlier generations, and do not want the brand engagement to be time consuming or mentally taxing.<sup>9</sup> The rules of consumer decision-making are being entirely rewritten by these emerging social media practices, which may offer directions for new branding approaches in the future.

Consider for instance the tactics implemented by the youth streetwear brand Supreme in generating a cult-like following through the efficient use of social media influencers, without the necessity of traditional and expensive push marketing tactics.<sup>10</sup> Very early on, Supreme totally relinquished control and supervision over its followers’ reviews and comments, ensuring a high degree of spontaneity and authenticity in the online engagement. Therefore, the more likes, retweets, shares, and (unmoderated) comments that Supreme generates on social media, the more popular and respected the brand appears. Here the company stands to co-opt the competencies of its dedicated followers. This phenomenon has emerged from the generation of young consumers who have defined their identities on social media as a free means of self-expression and communication.<sup>11</sup> It has been observed that modern-day self-branding among young people offers them the opportunity to be active participants in the production of web content and digital culture.<sup>12</sup> They create their own online presence that is open to approbation as well as criticism from their peers, and over time some may develop personas that are admired and followed by sizable groups. Such individuals are the emerging crop of social media micro-influencers and, as such, are the new advertisers for companies.<sup>13</sup> This type of marketing and branding approach is seen as essential by the company, since broadcast advertising using the one-to-many approach does not work on the internet.<sup>14</sup> Among the benefits Supreme has garnered from its strategy of using social media micro-influencers is high online engagement from its fans. A brand like Supreme is thus able to gain value on social media from being supported and endorsed by these youthful influencers and is able thereby to enhance its brand clout through influence and pull. Ultimately this serves as a positive feedback loop

for Supreme that further spreads the brand's reach and appeal and allows it to gain greater clout and loyalty among its followers.

U.K.-based online fashion sites ASOS and Boohoo that sell to 16-to-39 year olds have similar ambitions like Supreme in capturing the loyalty of the youth market. These "ultra-fast" fashion retailers have already disrupted Zara and H&M's speed-to-market business model by cutting down the design-to-store time by roughly half – to only 2-3 weeks.<sup>15</sup> Also being online and lacking physical stores, they do not have the associated overhead costs. Moreover, being online they are better able to track consumer analytics, which translates into new and interesting styles. For their customers, this means getting trendier apparel at very affordable prices, always a winning selling proposition. These companies actively make use of amateur micro-influencers to model their clothes on platforms like Instagram and thereby reach out to secondary niche markets. Another trendy and successful youth brand Fashion Nova recruits thousands of micro-influencers as brand ambassadors, who tag their photos wearing the brand's clothes.<sup>16</sup> Fashion Nova has partnered with several celebrities, like Cardi B, even before they achieved fame and garnered a huge following on Instagram.

What is even more remarkable lately is that some of the micro-influencers themselves are rising to leverage their social media popularity to launch their own "private fashion brands" on Instagram. From this sense, Instagram is said to be in the process of *democratizing* fashion.<sup>17</sup> Backed by engaging influencers and displaying novel and exciting styles, Instagram has now become the launchpad of a number of hip and trendy "Insta-fashion brands."<sup>18</sup> They have ramped up directly from the influencers' Instagram pages, without incurring significant startup and overhead costs related to marketing, merchandising and inventory control. Consider for instance the Los Angeles-based influencer Pio Arrobio and her LPA brand.<sup>19</sup> A onetime fashion designer, she has leveraged her expanding follower base into a successful, direct-to-consumer line of women's apparel. While she does the product design and photo shoots, an e-Commerce site called Revolve manages the production and logistics for the brand. For her young followers, LPA's appeal lies in her Dolce & Gabbana-meets-Supreme brand aesthetic, its one-of-a-kind styles, and its relatability and therefore authenticity. Increasingly, such Instagram-based fashion brands are gaining cult-like followings and showing measurable success – a third of Instagram users say that they have bought an item of clothing that they saw on the social platform. This trend is also catching on in other countries, even in emerging economies, where Instagram has rapidly gained in popularity. Young influencers with design expertise are launching their own Insta-fashion

brands and are very adept at coordinating photo shoots, creating original content, and posting behind-the-scenes stories of their collections.<sup>20</sup>

### Managerial Implications and Conclusions

What should be the lessons learned and strategic implications from these ultra-fashion disruptors for established mass-market retailers, like Gap, Zara, and H&M. First, these companies need to master the emerging tactics and practices of influencer marketing on social media. Although, they do make use of micro-influencers, they can learn a trick or two from the novel tactics applied by their new and nimble competitors. Second, established companies should also stay on the cutting edge of technology, especially when it comes to becoming more agile using consumer analytics and AI-based machine learning. 146-year old Levi's has been among the shining exemplars to have led the adoption of AI-based tools to assure the ultimate fitting jeans. In an indication of its commitment to AI, the company has even recruited a dedicated Artificial Intelligence Officer. Third, there is an emerging fashion zeitgeist labeled "See Now, Buy Now," often credited to ASOS and Boohoo, whereby the business of fashion has moved from seasons to trends. Burberry was the first established brand to adopt it and go "seasonless" – Mulberry, Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren have implemented the concept as well. Fourth, it is worth remembering that it still pays to be creative when it comes to fashion. American Eagle and Target are two companies that have bucked the declining industry trends by launching their successful women's lifestyle sub-brands: Aerie and Auden respectively. In conclusion, while ultra-fast fashion is here to stay, the ability of large companies to innovate and adapt cannot be written off entirely.

### Authors

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### Endnotes

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