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Gen Z adolescents: Clothing choices and psychological well-being

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Abstract

Clothing choices play an important role in shaping the psychological and social well-being of Gen Z adolescents. During adolescence, individuals actively search for identity, social acceptance, and self-expression, making them highly sensitive to peer influence, media exposure, and changing fashion trends. With the rising influence of western fashion, social media, and the tension between cultural heritage and modern identity, it is important to examine how clothing choices affect adolescents beyond just appearance. Clothing acts not only as a way to communicate social status but also as a psychological tool, influencing confidence, peer relationships, and self-esteem. At the same time, it can create pressure through social comparison and financial stress, highlighting both the positive and challenging impacts of fashion on young people.

The present study was undertaken to examine the psychological impact of clothing and fashion-related influences on adolescents, with special reference to peer pressure, self-esteem, body image, media influence, and economic stress. A descriptive research design was adopted, and the study was conducted among undergraduate students in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. A total of 125 respondents were selected using a convenient sampling technique. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions related to fashion awareness, social influence, emotional responses, and personal attitudes. The data were analyzed using percentage analysis. The findings revealed that a majority of adolescents actively follow clothing trends and rely heavily on social media, influencers, and advertisements for style inspiration. Clothing was found to positively shape confidence, mood, and personality expression; however, it also contributed to peer pressure, social comparison, financial stress, and feelings of low self-esteem, particularly when branded clothing was unaffordable. Many respondents reported regret over fashion-related spending and felt distracted due to the pressure to appear fashionable. Although traditional clothing was valued, western styles were largely perceived as more fashionable. Overall, the study highlighted that clothing choices significantly shape adolescents' identity, confidence, and psychological well-being, indicating the need for guidance to promote a balanced and healthy approach toward fashion and self-image.

Keywords: Fashion trends, teenagers, psychological impact, peer pressure, self-esteem, body image, social media influence

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial stage of life when young people try to understand themselves, form their identities, and find ways to express who they are. During this period, Gen Z adolescents are highly influenced by their peers social circles, and media, and they often look for ways to fit in and feel accepted. One of the ways adolescents communicate their personality and social belonging is through their clothing choices. What they wear can reflect their interests, values, and self-image, and it can also shape how others perceive them.

Teenagers often pay attention to trends and seek guidance from friends, social media, celebrities, and advertisements when making choices about their clothes. These influences can boost confidence and provide opportunities for creativity and self-expression. At the same time, the pressure to keep up with peers or popular styles can sometimes lead to stress, financial strain, and feelings of insecurity, especially if they cannot afford trendy or branded clothing.

Clothing also interacts with cultural identity. While traditional attire carries heritage and values, many adolescents prefer Western styles due to perceptions of modernity and trendiness.

Understanding these patterns is important because clothing choices reflect both personal and social aspects of adolescent life. This study focuses on how these choices influence young people's confidence, social interactions, self-esteem, and overall well-being, highlighting the importance of awareness and guidance to encourage balanced and thoughtful decision-making.

Objectives

1. To study the psychological impact of fashion trends on teenagers
2. To examine the influence of peer pressure on teenagers' fashion choices and their desire for social acceptance.

Methodology

The present study was conducted among undergraduate students in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh to understand the psychological impact of clothing and fashion on adolescents. A descriptive research design was used, as the study aimed to examine patterns and perceptions without manipulating any factors. A structured questionnaire with close-ended "Yes/No" questions was developed to gather information on fashion awareness, peer pressure, self-esteem, body image, media

influence, economic factors, and cultural clothing preferences. The questionnaire was reviewed before use to ensure clarity and suitability for the age group. A sample of 125 students was selected using a convenience sampling technique, based on their availability and willingness to participate. Primary data were collected through direct interaction with respondents, maintaining confidentiality and encouraging honest responses. After collection, the data were carefully coded, classified, and analyzed. Percentage analysis was used to identify trend and patterns in how fashion and clothing choices affect Gen Z's psychological and social well-being. The results were presented in tables and figures to allow easy interpretation.

Results

The socio-economic profile of the respondents provides an important background for understanding their exposure to fashion trends and related psychological influences. The age distribution of the respondents in Table 1 indicated that a majority (57%) belonged to the age group of 21-23 years, while 43% were in the 18-20 years age group. This indicates that most participants were at a stage of development characterized by heightened awareness of personal identity, social relationships, and physical appearance. The table indicated an equal distribution of males and females (50% each). This balance suggested that both genders are equally represented, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of clothing influences across male and female adolescents.

Table 1: Socio-economic status of respondents

Age		18-20 yrs	21-23yrs	
		43.00	57.00	
Gender		Male	Female	
		50.00	50.00	
Mother's Educational Status	10 th	Sr. Sec	Graduate	PG
	11.00	36.00	42.00	10.00
Father's Educational Status	2.00	28.00	42.00	26.00
Mother's Occupational Status	Housewife	Govt.	Private	Others
	71.00	19.00	9.60	1.00
Father's Occupational Status	Business	Govt.	Private	Others
	31.00	8.80	60.00	1.00
Parental Income Status	Below 10,000	10,000-20,000	20,000 - 40,000	Above 40,000
	10.40	23.20	40.00	26.40

Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Analysis of parental educational status revealed that most mothers (42%) and fathers (42%) were graduates, indicating a relatively educated family background. A considerable proportion of mothers (36%) had completed senior secondary education, while only 11% had education up to the 10th standard. In contrast, fathers showed higher educational attainment at the postgraduate level (26%) compared to mothers (10%). The presence of educated parents may contribute to increased awareness among students regarding lifestyle choices, including fashion and media exposure.

Occupational status showed that a majority of mothers (71%) were homemakers, whereas fathers were predominantly employed in the private sector (60%), followed by business (31%). The economic support provided by employed fathers may influence students' access to fashion products, branded clothing, and media consumption.

The table presented the parental monthly income distribution of the respondents. It is evident that a majority of the Gen Z adolescents belonged to middle and higher-income families which suggests relatively better access to fashionable clothing, branded apparel, and online shopping platforms. Adolescents from these income groups are more likely to accept and adopt current fashion trends, as financial resources reduce restrictions on experimenting with styles and purchasing trend-based clothing. Kaiser, 1997; Crane, 2012^[9, 5] in their studies showed that economic resources strongly influence individuals' ability to participate in fashion trends and gain social acceptance. The largest proportion of respondents (40.0%) reported a parental income between Rs 20,000 and Rs 40,000 per month, followed by 26.4% who belonged to households earning above Rs 40,000. Nearly one-fourth of the respondents (23.2%) fell in the Rs 10,000-20,000 income category, while only a small proportion (10.4%) belonged to low-income families earning below Rs. 10,000 per month. This indicates that most respondents have a fairly good financial background, and only a few come from low-income families. Workman and Freeburg (2010)^[18] and O'Cass (2004)^[12] reported that financial constraints can increase stress and dissatisfaction related to fashion consumption among young people. This interpretation is supported by the present findings, where many respondents reported financial stress and low self-esteem when unable to afford fashionable or branded clothing.

Since the sample included an equal number of males and females,

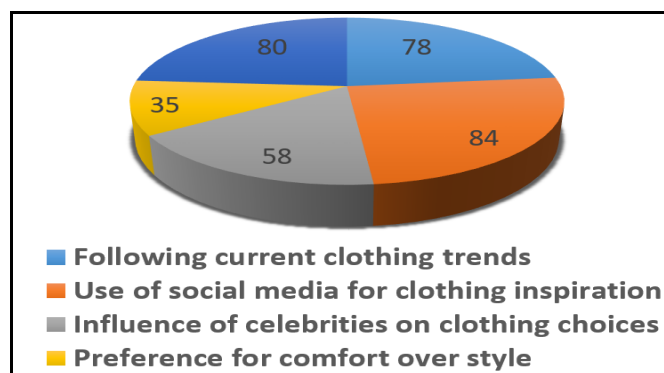
a gender-wise comparison was conducted. Examination of clothing choices and psychological responses revealed that both male and female adolescents are significantly influenced by peers, social media, and contemporary fashion trends. Gender-wise comparison confirms similar patterns across boys and girls. While previous studies suggested that female adolescents tend to be more fashion conscious and show greater engagement with branded clothing and style experimentation, male adolescents are similarly influenced by peer approval and social trends in determining their clothing choices (Maurya & Sharma, 2014)^[15].

The present findings supported these patterns, as both genders reported pressure to conform to peer expectations and a strong desire to stay updated with fashion trends. This indicated that peer influence is a common factor affecting identity expression, social acceptance, and self-esteem among Gen Z adolescents, regardless of gender. Furthermore, research highlighted that media exposure and social comparisons equally affect boys and girls, shaping their clothing decisions and perceptions of fashion (Maurya & Sharma, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Workman & Freeburg, 2010)^[15, 16, 18].

Overall, the socio-economic characteristics suggested that the respondents largely come from moderately educated and economically stable families. Such a background may play a significant role in shaping fashion awareness, purchasing capacity, exposure to media, and the psychological impact of fashion trends among teenagers.

The results in figure 1 demonstrated that Gen Z adolescents showed a high level of engagement with clothing trends and related psychological aspects. A significant majority (78%) reported following current clothing styles, which highlighted their desire to remain socially relevant and updated with contemporary fashion culture. This finding reflected the importance of clothing as a tool for identity formation and social belonging among young people. This finding is consistent with Kaiser (2012)^[9], who emphasized that adolescents use fashion/clothing as a means of social integration and identity formation.

Social media emerged as the most influential factor, with 84% of respondents using platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook for clothing inspiration. This indicated that digital media has become the primary driver of awareness and style adoption, shaping how adolescents perceive themselves and others.



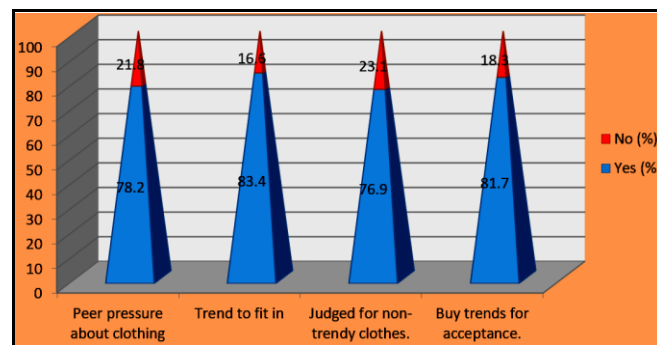
Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 1: Fashion awareness and preferences of respondents

This aligns with the Sharma & Agarwal (2025) ^[15] study, which found that social media significantly shapes Gen Z's fashion discovery and brand loyalty in India. Tiggemann & Slater (2014) ^[16] and Perloff (2014) ^[13] also confirmed that adolescents are heavily exposed to appearance-related ideals through digital media. Celebrity influence was also notable, with 58% acknowledging that public figures affect their clothing choices. This suggested that while peer and social media influence dominates, celebrity culture continues to play a meaningful role in shaping preferences. This reflects the growing impact of Bollywood stars and influencer culture, consistent with Kapitan & Silvera (2016) ^[10], who noted that celebrity endorsements and digital influencers strongly influence youth purchasing behavior. Recent studies on Gen Z streetwear culture also highlighted the role of celebrities in shaping identity and self-expression (Luthra *et al.* 2024) ^[11].

Data further revealed that 65% of adolescents prioritize style over comfort, while only 35% prefer comfort over style. This indicated that most adolescents value fashionable appearance and current trends more than ease or practicality while selecting clothes. Such behavior suggested a strong influence of peer approval and social image on clothing choices. Similar observations were made by Workman and Freeburg (2010) ^[18], who reported that adolescents often compromise on comfort in order to fit in with their peer groups and gain social acceptance. Further study suggested that both male and female adolescents are similarly influenced by peers and social media in making clothing decisions, although females may show slightly higher engagement with trend experimentation, while males may emphasize peer approval in their style choices. Furthermore, 80% of respondents acknowledged clothing as an important medium for identity expression. Clothing functions as a non-verbal communication tool through which adolescents construct and project their self-identity, individuality, and group affiliation (Crane, 2012; Entwistle, 2015) ^[5, 8]. This finding emphasized that clothing has psychological and social importance

beyond its basic functional purpose, especially during adolescence.



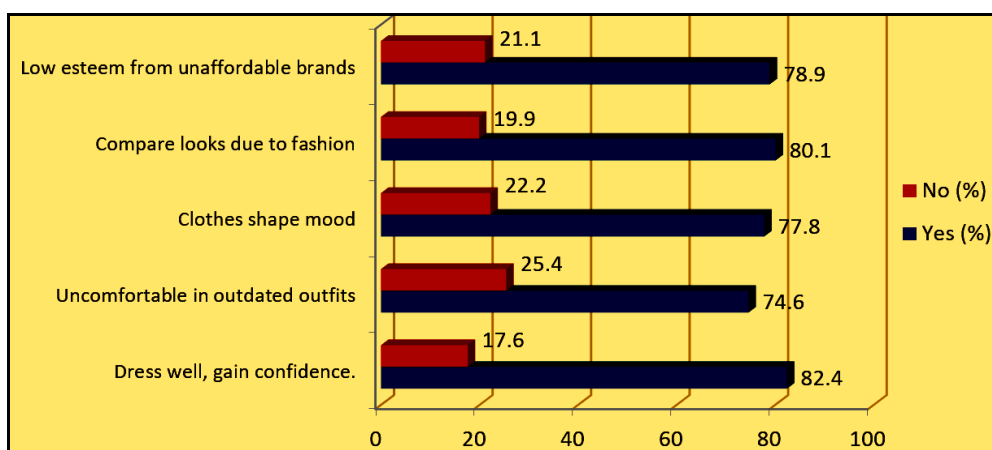
Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 2: Peer influence and social pressure

The findings presented in Figure 2 showed that peer pressure strongly influences adolescents' clothing choices. A high percentage of respondents (78.2%) reported experiencing pressure from peers regarding what they wear. Similarly, 83.4% stated that they follow fashion trends mainly to fit in socially, indicating that clothing is often used as a means of gaining acceptance among friends. Moreover, 76.9% of adolescents felt judged when they did not wear trendy clothes, suggesting that appearance plays an important role in social evaluation during adolescence. Additionally, 81.7% reported purchasing fashion items to gain social acceptance, highlighting the close link between clothing choices and the desire to belong to a peer group.

These results are supported by previous studies which have shown that adolescents are highly sensitive to peer opinions and often modify their appearance to avoid rejection and achieve social approval (Kaiser, 1997; Auty & Elliott, 2001) ^[9, 2]. Research by Workman and Freeburg (2010) ^[18] also emphasized that clothing and fashion act as social tools through which adolescents seek conformity and acceptance. Furthermore, Entwistle (2015) ^[8] explained that dress functions as a social signal, helping individuals communicate belonging and social status within a group.

The results in Figure 3 showed that clothing has a strong effect on adolescents' confidence, mood, and self-image. A large majority of respondents (82.4%) reported that dressing well makes them feel more confident. This suggests that clothing plays an important role in boosting self-confidence and positive self-perception. Further, 74.6% of adolescents felt uncomfortable when their outfit did not match current fashion trends, indicating a strong desire to fit in socially. Similarly, 77.8% agreed that clothes affect their mood, showing that what adolescents wear can influence how they feel emotionally throughout the day.

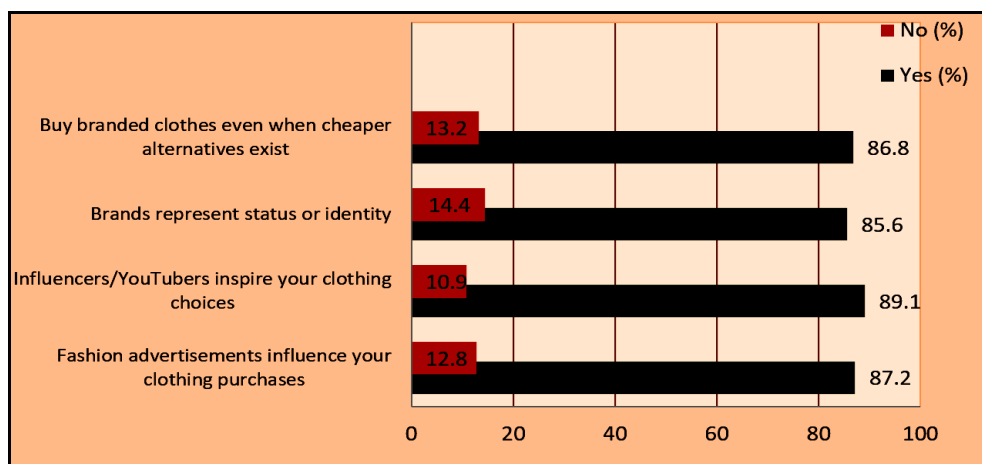


Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 3: Self-esteem, body image and mental well-being

In addition, 80.1% of respondents reported comparing their appearance with others based on fashion. This reflected the common tendency among adolescents to evaluate themselves through social comparison. Moreover, 78.9% felt low self-esteem when they were unable to afford branded clothing, highlighting the emotional pressure linked with fashion and brand consciousness. These findings are supported by earlier studies which explain that clothing and appearance are closely linked to self-esteem, mood,

and social comparison during adolescence (Kaiser, 1997; Entwistle, 2015) [9, 8]. Research by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) [16] also showed that appearance-based comparisons, especially influenced by fashion and media, can affect confidence and emotional well-being. Additionally, Workman and Freeburg (2010) [18] reported that branded and fashionable clothing often contributes to feelings of social acceptance and self-worth among young people.



Data in parentheses indicate percentages

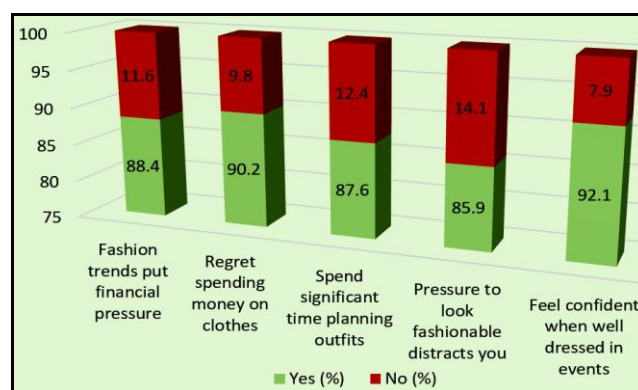
Fig 4: External influences on fashion choices among youth

Data in Figure 4 clearly showed that media and branding have a strong influence on adolescents' clothing decisions. A very high proportion of respondents (87.2%) agreed that fashion advertisements affect their clothing purchases. This suggested that advertisements play an important role in shaping preferences and buying behaviour. Similarly, 89.1% of respondents reported that influencers and YouTubers inspire their clothing choices. This highlights the growing impact of digital media personalities, who act as role models and trendsetters for adolescents. Their styles and recommendations strongly affect what young people choose to wear.

In addition, 85.6% of respondents felt that brands represent status or identity. This indicated that branded clothing is not seen only as a product but also as a symbol of social position and self-expression. Moreover, 86.8% reported buying branded clothes even when cheaper alternatives were available, showing that brand value and social image often matter more than price. These findings are supported by studies which suggested that advertising, social media influencers, and brand image strongly shape fashion choices among adolescents (Kaiser, 1997; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) [9, 6]. Research by Escalas and Bettman (2015) [7] also explained that brands help individuals express identity and gain social recognition. Additionally, Workman and Freeburg (2010) [18] reported that young consumers often prefer branded clothing due to its association with status and peer acceptance. Gender-wise analysis suggested that both male and female adolescents are influenced by advertisements, influencers, and brand image; however, females may show slightly higher engagement with digital influencers and trend experimentation, while males may place more emphasis on brand recognition and peer approval when selecting clothing. This aligns with prior research showing that although both genders respond to media and branding, the nature of their engagement differs slightly based on social and identity-related motivations (Maurya & Sharma, 2014; Workman & Freeburg, 2010) [15, 18].

A large majority (88.4%) of respondents, shown in Figure 5, reported that following fashion trends puts financial pressure on them. This showed that most adolescents feel stressed about spending money to keep up with changing fashion. Earlier studies also reported that trend-based clothing choices increase financial

burden among young consumers (Workman & Freeburg, 2010; Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003) [18, 3]. Most respondents (90.2%) expressed regret after spending money on clothes. This suggested that impulsive buying, influenced by trends and social pressure, may result in dissatisfaction later. Similar findings were reported by O'Cass (2004) [12], who observed that fashion-oriented consumers often experience post-purchase regret due to unnecessary spending. A high percentage (87.6%) of adolescents spend considerable time deciding what to wear. This showed that appearance is a major concern and requires mental effort and time. According to Kaiser (1997) [9], clothing decisions are closely linked with self-presentation and social approval, leading individuals to invest time in planning outfits. Many respondents (85.9%) felt that the pressure to look fashionable distracts them from daily activities. This suggested that concern about appearance can affect concentration and mental well-being. Entwistle (2015) [8] explained that continuous concern with appearance can create psychological stress, especially during adolescence.



Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 5: Fashion-related pressures and confidence among youth

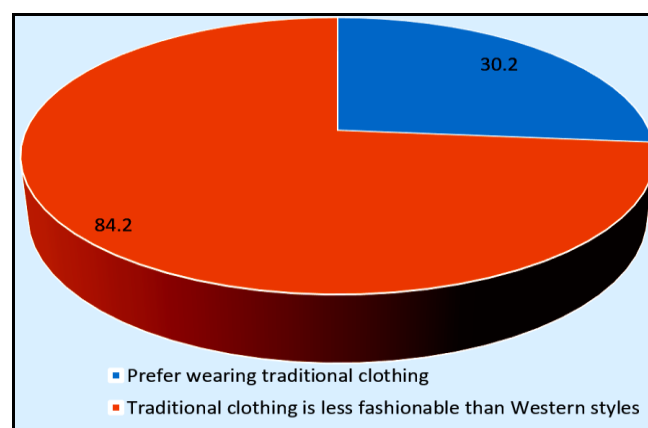
An overwhelming majority (92.1%) reported feeling more confident when they are well dressed for social events. This indicated that appropriate and fashionable clothing positively

affects self-confidence and social comfort. Previous research supported this finding, showing that clothing plays a key role in boosting confidence and self-esteem in social situations (Adam & Galinsky, 2012; Kaiser, 1997) ^[1, 9]. Gender-wise analysis indicated that both male and female adolescents experience financial and psychological pressures related to fashion, although females reported slightly higher concern with trend-following and outfit planning, while males tended to emphasize social approval and the perceived status associated with clothing. This supports earlier studies indicating that both genders are affected by fashion-related stress, but the ways in which it manifests may differ slightly based on social and identity-related factors (Maurya & Sharma, 2014; Workman & Freeburg, 2010) ^[15, 18].

Figure 6 indicated that only 30.2% of respondents reported that they prefer wearing traditional clothing, while a large majority do not prefer it. This indicated that traditional clothing is not the first choice for most adolescents in their daily life. The lower preference suggested a shift towards modern and western styles, which are often perceived as more suitable for everyday wear. Previous studies have shown that changing lifestyles and exposure to global fashion trends influence young people to move away from traditional attire (Entwistle, 2015) ^[8]. A very high proportion, 84.2% of respondents, felt that traditional clothing is less fashionable compared to western styles. This perception highlighted the strong impact of western fashion, media, and popular culture on adolescents' clothing preferences. Similar findings have been reported in research, which suggested that western clothing is often associated with modernity, trendiness, and social status, while traditional clothing is seen as less fashionable in contemporary settings (Crane, 2012; Kaiser, 1997) ^[5, 9]. Looking at the trends across genders, female adolescents appeared slightly more willing to wear traditional clothing during cultural or festive occasions, while males overwhelmingly favored western styles for everyday wear. Despite this difference in occasional preferences, both genders largely view western fashion as more trendy and socially acceptable. This indicates that, although cultural or ceremonial factors may influence choices, contemporary fashion trends strongly shape clothing preferences for both male and female adolescents (Maurya & Sharma, 2014) ^[15].

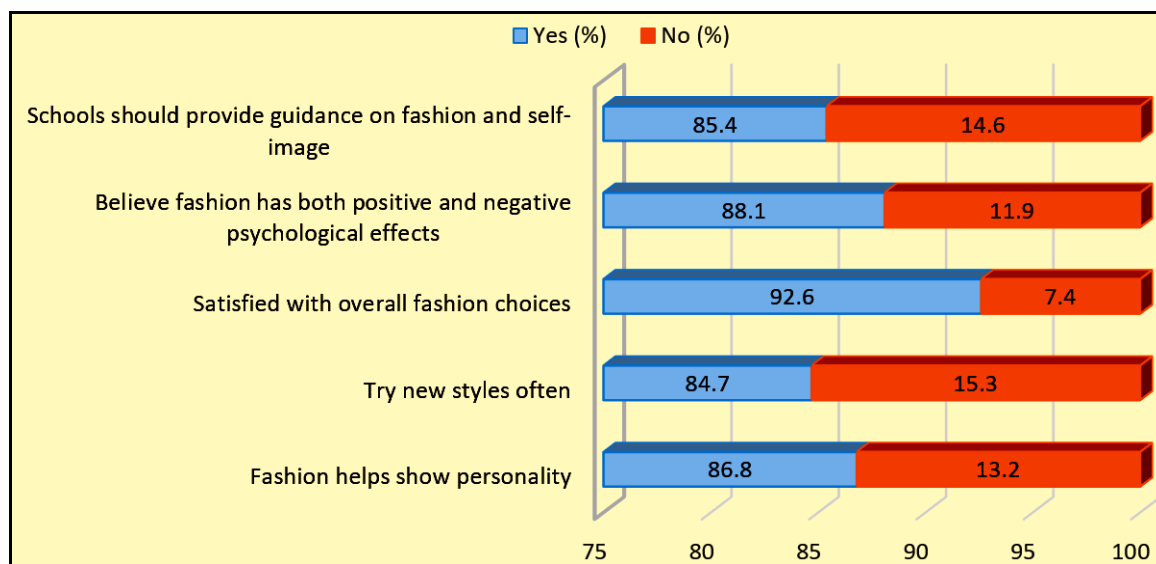
A large majority, 86.8% of respondents, presented in Figure 7 agreed that fashion helps them express their personality.

This showed that adolescents use clothing as a way to communicate who they are and how they want others to see them. Earlier studies have also reported that clothing plays an important role in self-expression and identity formation during adolescence (Kaiser, 1997; Entwistle, 2015) ^[9, 8]. About 84.7% of respondents said they often try new styles. This indicated a strong interest in experimentation and openness to change in fashion choices. Few studies suggested that adolescents frequently experiment with appearance as part of exploring their identity and gaining social acceptance (Crane, 2012; Auty & Elliott, 2001) ^[5, 2]. A very high proportion, 92.6% of respondents, reported being satisfied with their overall fashion choices. This suggested that most adolescents feel confident and comfortable with how they dress. Similar findings have been linked to positive self-image and increased confidence among young people (Kaiser, 1997; Adam & Galinsky, 2012) ^[9, 1]. Around 88.1% of respondents believed that fashion can have both positive and negative effects on mental well-being. This showed awareness among adolescents that fashion can boost confidence but may also create pressure or stress. Previous studies supported this view, noting that fashion influences self-esteem, mood, and social comparison (Entwistle, 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014) ^[16, 8].



Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 6: Traditional vs. western clothing preferences among youth



Data in parentheses indicate percentages

Fig 7: Fashion expression and psychological impact among youth

Both male and female adolescents recognize fashion as a tool for self-expression and social identity. Females show slightly more interest in experimenting with trends, but overall, the perception of fashion as important for identity and confidence is strong across genders (Maurya & Sharma, 2014) ^[15].

A large majority, 85.4% of respondents, felt that schools should guide students on fashion choices and self-image. This highlighted the need for educational support to help adolescents manage fashion-related pressure and develop healthy self-esteem. Research suggested that school-based guidance can play an important role in promoting positive body image and self-concept (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Piran, 2016) ^[4, 14].

Summary

The study explored how clothing choices influence the psychological and social well-being of Gen Z adolescents. Adolescence is a period of self-discovery, and young people actively seek identity, social acceptance, and self-expression. Clothing serves as a tool for both personal expression and social signaling, helping adolescents communicate personality, confidence, and status. The findings revealed that most adolescents follow current fashion trends and rely heavily on social media, influencers, and advertisements for style inspiration. Clothing positively impacts confidence, mood, and self-expression. At the same time, it also creates pressures related to peer comparison, social acceptance, and financial strain. Many respondents reported feeling stressed or regretful over fashion-related spending and experienced low self-esteem when unable to afford branded clothing.

Although traditional clothing is valued by some, western styles are largely perceived as more fashionable. The study also highlighted that adolescents are highly influenced by peers and media, often experimenting with new styles to fit in socially. Overall, clothing choices play a dual role: they shape adolescents' identity, confidence, and social relationships, while also introducing pressures that can affect emotional well-being. The research emphasized the importance of guidance from schools and families to help adolescents develop a balanced understanding of fashion. Encouraging awareness of healthy self-image and thoughtful fashion choices can allow teenagers to express themselves while managing social and psychological pressures effectively.

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