

Style and Self-Expression: How Teenage Girls in Shanghai Communicate Their Personalities, Beliefs and Emotions Through Clothing and Social Media?

Yutong Wang¹

¹ North Cross School Shanghai, Shanghai 200000, China

Correspondence: Yutong Wang, North Cross School Shanghai, Shanghai 200000, China.

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Abstract

This study examines how teenage girls in Shanghai utilize clothing to convey their personalities, beliefs, and emotions, both in offline interactions and on social media. Through semi-structured interviews with four adolescents, combined with an examination of their Xiaohongshu and WeChat representations, the research illustrates how clothing serves as a communicative resource for negotiating individuality, group belonging, and cultural identity. The participants displayed diverse styles-ranging from gothic resistance to vintage sustainability, situational adaptation, and comfort-oriented minimalism-each reflecting their self-concept and value orientation. Shopping practices further revealed tensions between ethical commitments and the convenience of fast fashion, showing that adolescents make choices influenced by affordability, accessibility, and sustainability awareness. Psychological experiences were central, as clothing not only enhanced confidence and self-expression but also exposed participants to cultural norms and gendered expectations. Social media emerged as a double-edged tool: while it facilitated inspiration and identity exploration, adolescents resisted passive imitation of influencers, curating instead their own digital personas. Overall, the findings highlight the complex interplay between global fashion trends, local cultural pressures, social media dynamics, and the formation of adolescent identity in Shanghai. This research fills a gap by focusing on a specific group—Shanghai teenage girls—offering nuanced insight into their unique fashion practices.

Keywords: social media, teenagers, fashion, identity

1. Introduction

This study investigates the clothing choices, shopping preferences, self-expression, and social media practices of four female adolescents in Shanghai. Fashion is not simply functional or decorative, but a communicative resource through which adolescents negotiate belonging, distinction, and individuality. Prior research has

shown that adolescence is a particularly significant period for identity exploration, where clothing becomes a central tool to express values, emotions, and affiliations (Kaiser, 2012). In the context of Shanghai, a rapidly globalizing city where local traditions intersect with global fashion trends-both individual desires and societal pressures shape adolescents' fashion

choices.

The aim of this study is twofold: first, to understand how adolescents in Shanghai use clothing to construct and communicate self-identity; and second, to explore how their shopping behaviors, emotional experiences, and social media engagement reflect broader cultural and psychological dynamics. Through the interviews with four Shanghai teenage girls, this research finds that they truly use clothing as a medium of identity expression, and rely strongly on social media, but are not totally influenced by influencers. The research provides insights that the specific group, Shanghai teenage girls, have their own thoughts about their clothing choices, belief expression, and the application of social media.

2. Literature Review

Fashion has been widely recognized as a symbolic system that communicates identity. According to Badaoui et al. (2016), adolescents' clothing consumption is influenced by both personal identity (individual self-expression) and social identity (group belonging), with significant variations across gender and age. This aligns with broader fashion theory that emphasizes clothing as a performative language (Entwistle, 2000).

Body image research demonstrates that clothing choices strongly affect emotional well-being. Grogan (2016) argues that clothing can reinforce self-esteem or amplify insecurities, depending on the degree of alignment between personal style and societal norms. Similarly, Perloff (2014) highlights the role of media in shaping adolescents' body image, especially among girls exposed to idealized representations online.

Social media plays a particularly significant role in adolescent fashion practices. Studies have found that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok encourage peer comparison and trend adoption, but also provide opportunities for creativity and resistance (Fardouly et al., 2020; Marwick, 2015). In China, Xiaohongshu has emerged as a powerful site where youth exchange fashion ideas and explore identity performance (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019).

Recent studies emphasize the role of social media in shaping adolescents' fashion choices and body image. Fardouly et al. (2015) highlight that social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not just sites of self-presentation but also serve as spaces for comparison, especially

for adolescents who are still developing their sense of self. This constant comparison can lead to increased body dissatisfaction and a stronger desire to conform to the trends presented by influencers. However, social media also provides a space for creative self-expression, where adolescents can curate their own image and resist dominant beauty ideals. As Marwick (2015) highlights, social media allows users to perform and negotiate their identity, presenting fashion as a tool for both conformity and resistance.

In the context of Shanghai, the blending of global fashion influences with local cultural norms yields a distinctive fashion identity among adolescents. Zhang & Hjorth (2019) argue that Chinese youth, especially in metropolitan areas, are navigating the tension between embracing global fashion trends and staying rooted in their local cultural traditions. This hybrid identity is often reflected in their clothing choices, where elements of Western fashion are incorporated into local styles. This dynamic interplay between the global and the local is crucial for understanding how young people in Shanghai engage with fashion and identity.

Additionally, the increasing awareness of sustainability among adolescents has influenced their fashion choices. McNeill & Moore (2015) assert that young consumers are increasingly motivated by ethical concerns, such as environmental impact and labor rights, when choosing clothing. Platforms like Xiaohongshu facilitate discussions around sustainable fashion, where adolescents share tips on eco-friendly brands and second-hand shopping. This shift towards more sustainable fashion practices aligns with broader global trends. However, in China, it is also influenced by the rapid growth of fast fashion and the desire for more affordable, trendy clothing.

This study systematically reviews the relationship between social media use and adolescent identity development, examining how both the quantity (time spent) and quality (social comparison, self-presentation) of social media use influence aspects of identity exploration, commitment, self-concept clarity, and identity distress.

Besides, this study explores the identity construction of young fashion designers in Mainland China, focusing on designers born

between the 1980s and 1990s and how they express personal identity through their design work.

Thus, the study reveals how complex interaction between global fashion, local culture, personalities, beliefs, emotions, social media, and sustainability shapes adolescent girls' fashion practices in Shanghai. These factors are intertwined with personal identity and social belonging, making fashion a multi-dimensional aspect of adolescent life. Previous research focused on people who came from other areas, genders, and ages, but there was no research about the specific group, Shanghai teenage girls so that this research can fill the gap.

3. Methods

Four female adolescents aged 16–18 participated in this study. They were recruited through personal contacts and invited to participate in survey questions via WeChat. Each survey included 13 questions, and participants gave their feedbacks by texting. In addition to surveys, their WeChat Moments and Instagram accounts were examined to understand how they represented themselves on social media.

All participants are identified with pseudonyms: Isabella gravitates towards punk and gothic aesthetics. Rubbi values sustainability and vintage fashion. Shu adapts style situationally, influenced by hair color and context. Yoyo prefers simplicity and comfort.

Thematic coding was applied to interview transcripts. Direct quotations from participants are included to highlight their authentic voices.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Dressing Style and Self-Identity

Each participant displayed distinct styles that reflected their self-identity. Isabella explained, "Wearing black and gothic clothes makes me feel powerful and different." Her rebellious choices resonate with Badaoui et al. (2016), who argue that adolescents' fashion consumption is deeply tied to identity construction. Isabella also linked her clothing to feminist values, noting that dressing outside the mainstream was a form of resistance. Rubbi adopted an environmentally conscious approach, preferring natural fabrics and British-inspired vintage fashion. She said: "I love my clothes having their own stories." This reflects research by Joy et al. (2012), who highlights how sustainable and vintage fashion practices allow young people to express

individuality while aligning with ethical values. Shu described her style as situational: "When I dyed my hair blonde, I felt like I had to wear lighter dresses to match. Clothing always changes with how I look." This illustrates how identity is negotiated through appearance and context, consistent with Kaiser (2012), who views clothing as part of the body's extended presentation. Finally, Yoyo preferred relaxed, pastel-colored clothing, saying, "Comfort makes me feel more like myself than fashion trends do." Her inward focus echoes Tiggemann & Lacey (2009), who found that comfort-oriented clothing choices are linked to higher body satisfaction.

4.2 Shopping Channels and Values

Shopping behaviors revealed strong value orientations. Isabella and Rubbi frequently shopped at thrift stores and vintage markets. Isabella explained: "Fast fashion feels too commercial for me; second-hand clothes make me feel unique." Rubbi emphasized sustainability, aligning with Han et al. (2017), who found that young consumers increasingly view second-hand fashion as ethical consumption. By contrast, Shu and Yoyo relied on online platforms such as Taobao and Xiaohongshu. Shu admitted: "It is convenient — I can get whatever I want in a few clicks, but sometimes I still go offline to check the fit." This reflects the hybrid consumer practices described by McNeill & Moore (2015), where fast fashion coexists with sustainability discourses. Yoyo similarly preferred online shopping for affordability and variety, highlighting the tension between individual values and mass-market accessibility. The research reveals that this generation of designers, who often have overseas study experiences and Western fashion education backgrounds, has developed a design style that blends both Chinese and Western cultural elements. Their work not only reflects the recreation of traditional Chinese elements but also expresses cultural identity in the context of globalization. Fashion design education plays a crucial role in shaping the identities of this generation of designers, particularly in fostering cross-cultural design thinking and innovation (Zhang, 2021).

4.3 Clothing and Psychological Experience

Fashion choices also had strong psychological effects. Isabella said, "When I dress in my style, I feel free and confident, like I am truly myself."

This aligns with Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010), who found that adolescents use fashion as a tool for empowerment. Rubbi described vintage clothing as affirming her uniqueness: “When someone compliments my outfit, I feel like they see me for who I am.” Shu highlighted how external validation shapes self-perception: “When I wear dresses, teachers treat me better, and people smile more. It changes how I feel.” This echoes Fredrickson & Roberts’ (1997) objectification theory, which suggests that women often internalize external judgments. Yoyo, by contrast, explained: “Loose and soft clothes calm me down. I do not care if people notice me or not.” This reflects findings by Kwon (1991) that clothing comfort enhances self-assurance and reduces social anxiety.

4.4 The Role of Social Media

The study finds systematic associations between social media use and various dimensions of adolescent identity development, especially in terms of identity exploration and commitment. However, the quality of social media use, such as social comparison and self-presentation, may increase identity distress, negatively impacting adolescents’ self-concept clarity. The research emphasizes that the effects of social media use are not solely determined by the amount of time spent on platforms, but also by the way the platforms are utilized and the content consumed (Avci, 2024). All participants reported daily use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat. Rather than copying influencers, they curated their own digital fashion spaces. Shu shared: “I scroll Xiaohongshu every night for inspiration, but I always add my own touch.” This supports Marwick (2015), who argues that social media fosters both imitation and creative self-presentation. Isabella followed feminist and resistance-oriented accounts, aligning with Zhang & Hjorth (2019), who highlight Xiaohongshu as a site of identity exploration. Interestingly, none of the participants identified a single favorite influencer, suggesting that adolescents are not passive consumers but active curators of fashion. This suggests that teenage girls in Shanghai prefer dressing themselves based on their own understanding of fashion, rather than following internet trends mindlessly. This contrasts with traditional models of media influence, supporting Fardouly et al. (2020), who argue that adolescents reinterpret digital fashion content through their own values.

4.5 Constraints and Cultural Factors

Participants also highlighted structural and cultural constraints. Isabella noted, “When I wear tank tops in public, people stare or make comments. It makes me cover up.” This reflects the gendered surveillance described by Bartky (1990), where women are subjected to constant scrutiny of their appearance. Rubbi found elaborate gowns impractical: “I love them, but I cannot wear them on the metro—it looks strange.” Yoyo explained that seasonal shifts shaped her choices: “I want to wear light dresses all year, but Shanghai winters are too cold.” These experiences echo Entwistle (2000), who emphasizes that cultural norms and material conditions constrain fashion practices.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that adolescents in Shanghai use clothing as a medium of identity construction, ethical commitment, psychological empowerment, and digital self-expression. At the same time, they navigate cultural constraints and gendered expectations that limit their freedom of dress. The findings reinforce prior scholarship: fashion as a communicative resource (Badaoui et al., 2016), clothing as empowerment (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), and social media as participatory culture (Marwick, 2015; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). By including the direct voices of participants, this study emphasizes the authenticity of adolescent perspectives. It provides insight into how global and local forces intersect in shaping youth fashion in contemporary Shanghai. Future research could expand this study by including male adolescents or non-binary youth, or by examining how algorithm-driven social media platforms further influence fashion identity construction. My research focuses on a specific group: adolescent girls in Shanghai. It explores the relationship between their clothing choices, self-expression, psychological state, and social media usage. However, certain limitations remain, for instance, the sample size was too small; a larger sample would yield more reliable and generalizable results. Additionally, the research methodology could be improved—shifting from surveys to interviews would allow for more in-depth and comprehensive responses, rather than relying solely on rigid, pre-set questions.

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