How Fashion Trends Become Trends: Who Really Decides?

Name Date Class

Reading

1 Why do shops in different countries sell similar colors and shapes in the same season? Part of the answer is an industry that sells **forecasts** of what will be popular, months or years before shoppers see the clothes. This lesson describes how that system works, based on researchers and industry sources, and says where the claims are uncertain.

2 Early theories explained fashion through social class. In 1904, the German sociologist Georg Simmel argued that the upper classes create fashion, lower classes copy it through **imitation**, and the **elite** then move on to something new to stay distinct. Later scholars questioned this idea. In 1969, Herbert Blumer proposed that fashion comes from **collective** selection: designers do not command taste but try to identify what most people are already ready to accept. Other researchers describe a “trickle-up” pattern, in which styles begin with young people or subcultures and are picked up by designers. One textbook gives Harajuku street fashion in Japan as an example. None of these models explains every trend, and one reference work says the historical evidence for an orderly trickle-down is not very convincing.

3 Today, much of the planning is done by trend forecasters. WGSN, founded in 1998, sells **subscription** access to its reports to fashion brands and retailers. It says it consults about 2,800 outside data sources, and that more than 250 experts add analysis, with analysts checking its forecasts in an approach it calls “analyst in the loop.” Pantone, a color company, publishes color reports for New York Fashion Week, and its Color Institute chooses a Color of the Year. Researchers who studied forecasting agencies in Paris reported that they look two, five, or even ten years ahead by searching for “weak signals,” small early signs of social change. Their customers are businesses, which pay to avoid costly mistakes.

4 The timeline is long. A 2012 book on color forecasting for fashion describes palettes that are often drawn up 18 to 24 months before the selling season. A page from the University of Leeds notes that the traditional supply chain from design to shop took about 18 months, and that newer manufacturing systems have shortened it, in some cases to as little as three weeks between manufacture and retail. In industry language, the gap between planning and delivery is the **lead time**, and it varies widely between companies.

5 Do forecasters predict trends or create them? WGSN says that its TrendCurve AI model forecasts trends with 94 percent accuracy up to a year ahead. That is the company’s own figure, and this lesson found no independent test of it. WGSN has also made different claims over time: 90 percent for up to twelve months when it launched a tool in 2022, and “over 90 percent” for up to two years in a blog post that year. There is also a logical problem. If many brands, mills, and retailers choose similar colors two years ahead, those are the colors that exist in shops, so a forecast that guides production can be partly **self-fulfilling**. The Leeds page also mentions an opposing view, that forecasting encourages waste and overconsumption. This lesson found no study that measures how large the effect is.

6 What reaches ordinary shops is usually a simplified version of the runway. Buyers **curate** the ideas, choosing the ones they think customers will accept. Social media adds another route. Bloomberg Businessweek reported in 2024 that editors at magazines such as Vogue once dictated styles, but that smartphones and social media made fashion more visible and trend-calling more **volatile**. A **viral** video can spread a style quickly, and short-lived styles are often called **microtrends**. Articles and student blogs say that microtrends now last weeks instead of years, but this lesson found no rigorous measurement of that claim.

7 Almost everyone who makes a trend claim has an interest in it. Pantone says its Color of the Year is not an **arbitrary** decision, but its 2026 choice, a white called Cloud Dancer, was criticized by some designers as safe. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission requires influencers to **disclose** clearly when they have a paid or free-product connection to a brand they **endorse**, and it has sent warning letters to influencers and brands. Magazines earn money in other ways. Two of the trend reports used for the companion lesson on Fall/Winter 2026-27 state on their pages that the publisher may earn an **affiliate** commission when readers buy through its links.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**forecasts**	_____	**A**	the act of copying something
2	**imitation**	_____	**B**	make known something that was private
3	**elite**	_____	**C**	publicly recommend a product
4	**collective**	_____	**D**	changing quickly and unpredictably
5	**subscription**	_____	**E**	choose items carefully for an audience
6	**lead time**	_____	**F**	earning money from sales through links
7	**self-fulfilling**	_____	**G**	regular payment for a service
8	**curate**	_____	**H**	a small, powerful and wealthy group
9	**volatile**	_____	**I**	becoming true because it is expected
10	**viral**	_____	**J**	trends that rise and fade quickly
11	**microtrends**	_____	**K**	based on chance, not on reason
12	**arbitrary**	_____	**L**	shared by all members of a group
13	**disclose**	_____	**M**	the gap between planning and delivery
14	**endorse**	_____	**N**	statements about what will happen
15	**affiliate**	_____	**O**	spreading very quickly online

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

affiliate	**arbitrary**	**collective**	**curate**	**disclose**	**elite**	**endorse**	**forecasts**	**imitation**	**lead time**
self-fulfilling	**subscription**	**viral**	**volatile**						

1 Companies pay for _____ of which colors will sell next year.

2 Children learn many skills through _____ of adults.

3 Only a small _____ could afford the first custom-made suits.

4 The rules were a _____ decision made by the whole committee.

5 She pays a monthly _____ to read the trend reports.

6 The factory has a _____ of six weeks for every new order.

7 Predicting that a product will sell out can be _____ if shoppers rush to buy it.

8 Buyers _____ the runway ideas that they think customers will accept.

9 Fashion trends can be _____ and change several times in a year.

10 A _____ video can make a style popular within days.

11 Pantone says its choice of color was not _____ .

12 Influencers must _____ when a brand has paid them.

13 Several athletes _____ the brand in its advertisements.

14 The website earns an _____ commission when readers buy through its links.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What question does the first paragraph raise, and what does the lesson say it will describe?

2 According to the reading, how did Simmel in 1904 explain the way fashion changes?

3 How does Blumer's idea of collective selection differ from Simmel's view, and what does the reading say about the historical evidence for trickle-down?

4 How does WGSN describe its methods, and how does it earn money?

5 What did researchers who studied forecasting agencies in Paris report about how far ahead the agencies look?

6 According to the reading, how long does the traditional supply chain from design to shop take, and what has changed?

7 Why does the reading say that WGSN's 94 percent accuracy figure should be treated carefully?

8 What does it mean to say that a forecast can be "partly self-fulfilling," and what opposing view does the reading mention?

9 The reading says almost everyone who makes a trend claim has an interest in it. Using the last paragraph, explain who has an interest and how each one benefits.

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"An independent study has proved that trend forecasters create most fashion trends."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that trend forecasting is useless."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with the fact about affiliate commissions? Is its purpose to accuse magazines of dishonesty, to give an example of a business interest, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Simmel argued that the upper classes create fashion and lower classes copy it.

2 **T / F** Blumer argued that designers command what people must wear.

3 **T / F** WGSN sells subscription access to its reports to brands and retailers.

4 **T / F** Pantone sells clothing to shoppers in its own stores.

5 **T / F** A 2012 book describes color palettes drawn up 18 to 24 months before the selling season.

6 **T / F** The Leeds page says the supply chain from design to shop has become much slower.

7 **T / F** WGSN has given different accuracy claims over time.

8 **T / F** An independent test has confirmed WGSN's 94 percent accuracy figure.

9 **T / F** Bloomberg Businessweek reported that magazine editors once dictated styles.

10 **T / F** The FTC rules on influencer disclosure apply in every country in the world.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 How do you learn about new styles: shops, social media, friends, magazines, or somewhere else?

2 Have you ever bought something because a friend or an influencer had it? How did you decide?

3 In Simmel's theory, the elite move on when others copy them. Can you think of a modern example, such as a brand or a style that became too common?

4 Blumer said designers identify what people are ready to accept. Do you think designers lead taste or follow it? Explain.

5 Give an example of a style that began with young people or a subculture in your country and later became mainstream.

6 Forecasting companies charge businesses large fees. Do you think it is worth paying for predictions about what people will want? Why?

7 Colors for a season are chosen 18 to 24 months ahead. Does that change how you feel about following trends?

8 If many companies choose the same colors two years ahead, who really decides what we can buy? Give your view.

9 The reading says WGSN's accuracy figure is the company's own claim. How much should we trust a figure that comes from the seller?

10 Do you think microtrends are fun, wasteful, or both? What might be their effect on the clothes people throw away?

11 How can you tell whether a social media post is paid advertising? Should the rules for influencers be the same in every country?

12 Pantone's Color of the Year for 2026 was criticized by some people as too safe. Should a company be able to name a color of the year? Why or why not?

13 Magazines may earn money when readers click shopping links. Does this change how much you trust their trend reports? Explain.

14 If you could design a fairer system for deciding what clothes are made, what would it look like?

Language Focus: Passive Voice for Processes

The passive voice (be + past participle) puts the thing that is affected at the start of the sentence. It is common when describing how a process works, especially when the person or company doing the action is unknown or less important.

In the reading:

- "…**are picked up** by designers."
- "Today, much of the planning **is done** by trend forecasters."
- "…palettes that **are** often **drawn up** 18 to 24 months before the selling season."

Practice: Rewrite in the passive voice, without naming who does the action: *"Designers show the collections in February."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/how-fashion-trends-form

Notes