



FALL FASHION'S SALUTE TO TEEN STYLE

It's hard to believe what a difference few inches of fabric can make. A simple stitch to a skirt's hemline can instantly take it from tailored to tarty. The result may not mean much to adults but it often does to their children. Teen fashion choices haven't been more confusing and full of pressure for parents and teenagers.

BY RICHA GULATI

"It's hard to know today which clothes look classy and which don't," says Virginia teen Chhaya Nene.

Nene is not the stereotypical teen who aches to leave her parents behind and hit the mall with friends. She, like some of her friends, takes her parents shopping with her. "Shopping with my parents means that I always have someone looking out for me, giving me an honest opinion and making sure that I look appropriate," Nene explains.

Teenage fashion is often a source of anxiety for parents. But with an increased number of choices and relentless marketing, teens too are feeling the pressure. The teenage market is lucrative and an ever-increasing part of the retail industry is focused on it. Offshoots of established adult fashion magazines, like Teen Vogue, spring up yearly and devote hundreds of glossy pages to teen style. But, as apparel choices for teens grow, so does the confusion in figuring out what to select.

For Nene, like many other teens, finding modest, but trendy clothes today takes more effort than before. With young celebrities influencing fashion for the young and old alike, clothes have grown more fitted – and often more revealing. Her parents help her keep perspective on what clothes give the right impression to her peers at school, while her friends help keep her updated on trends when she shops.

Mystifying Dresses Are Source Of Pride

Mahima Poddar, owner of Washing-

ton, DC metro area boutique Chaubara Studio, finds that the majority of her teen clients shop with their parents, particularly when shopping for traditional desi clothes.

“The teenagers who shop in the boutique for Indian clothes don’t always know how to wear traditional clothes, so they definitely shop with their parents who know what a proper sari or lehnga looks like,” Poddar says.

The South Asian teens often bring their parents for non-traditional pieces as well, she explains. Remarkably, Poddar rarely witnesses any arguments between mother and daughter.

“Often, they compromise, and the parent will want a hemline lowered while the teen wants a more modern cut,” she says, adding while South Asian parents don’t seem to mind sleeveless and even belly-baring designs, they are not quick to accept backless pieces.

Boutique owners explain that teens ultimately look for pieces they can mix and match. Sowmya Iyengar, owner of Washington, DC’s Azarias boutique, says that when shopping for

traditional Indian garments, her youngest clients always want to pair a decorated choli with jeans or a simple tank top with a lavish skirt for a modern look. So prevalent is the trend that Iyengar designs her outfits so they can be mixed and matched with ease.

As the awareness of Indian culture in mainstream media is increasing, South Asian teens are also getting bolder with their style and looking for ways to show

off their heritage. Many teens like to wear desi clothes in non-traditional ways, says Iyengar.

Nene’s sense of style falls in line with Iyengar’s observations. She routinely wears her traditional garments to school, having even worn a full sari to school on a regular day. “It’s also a matter of pride,” she explains. “Even in a school with few Indians, I want to be able to show other students that I am proud of my background.”

Appealing To A Broader Group

South Asian teens are not the only group to get in on the ethnic wear trend. Nene’s non-South Asian friends have asked her how to wear a sari and have expressed interest in wearing some of her dresses to school as well.

Poddar designs precisely for this diverse clientele of teens who want to experiment with traditional Indian style. She not only carries Indian designers in her store, but also designs a western wear collection herself that is a departure from the usual “fusion” wear.

“The cuts are really modern and follow today’s hottest trends: peasant skirts, strapless dresses, and slim skirt designs,” she says. Not based on the usual tunic and kurta top trend, Poddar’s designs retain an ethnic flair because of the exceptional fabric she uses for her designs, such as 100 percent silk or crepe. She holds three to four fashion shows a year, with at least one at Howard University in Washington, DC, where trendy teens and young adults rave about the ethnic styles.

Many Choices To Look Cool

Although ethnic trends are more subdued for fall, Iyengar finds teens are still into boho bags, colorful scarves and beaded tunics, a lingering trend from last summer that remains strong in the teen market.

These colorful accessories work well as a way to add color to fall’s more somber styles. Heavier fabrics, like wool instead of cotton for ethnic print scarves, are one way to keep the look fresh for fall. Handbags are also bigger, and therefore more practical, than ever. Popular versions have a wintry feel like using cable-knit wool for



Poddar designs for a diverse clientele of teens who want to experiment.

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the body of the bag.

With so many choices and the pressure to look good, it's challenging to find a balance for teens who want to stand out from the crowd by experimenting to create their own unique style without straying too far from what's cool to peers. What then will reliably take them back to school this fall?

Designers seemed to borrow heavily from what they see teens are already wearing for runway inspiration. One standout trend is the "mix and match" layering approach to dressing – a hallmark look of teenage style – that has taken over the runways for this fall. Wearing a hoodie or denim blazer over a dressy skirt, or layering a turtleneck under a dress to take a summer dress into fall, is a common teen tactic that has got unanimous designer support this season. One way to update the look for fall is to invest in a knit sweater dress. Whether a chunky style worn on its own or a slimmer version layered over airy dresses paired with tall boots, it is a warm and feminine way to continue wearing dresses come fall.

Another trend for teens to watch out for is one that their mothers might re-

member from their own youth: leggings. Under dresses and kurtis, opaque leggings can transform almost any top into a cold-weather ready outfit and/or give modesty to a revealing top. Leggings are another way to reliably dress down clothes to give them a youthful flair. Footless capri options in lighter colors like gray and white carry spring dresses into early fall, while ankle-length wool leggings in dark colors, like charcoal and black, work well in winter.

Leggings are not

the only young style to influence fall runways. Plaid, a staple of schoolgirl style, is back too. For those who prefer a bold version of the preppy look, plaid dresses and pants are a standout style. But for those

that shy away from a head-to-toe tartan look, choose plaid accessories like headbands and shoes. Use an argyle cardigan or crisp white shirt to complete the look.

Although the embellishment trend of embroidery and beading has cooled off, colors that are always found on the South Asian palette are hotter than ever. Deep jewel tones like royal purple, teal, and forest green are standout choices for fall. The most popular color this fall, though, is one at the heart of South Asian fashion: red. Whether in a vibrant, fire-engine hue or a deeper burgundy, every shade of red is hot on the runway and sure to make a statement for fall. Fearless fashionistas will want to wear one of fall's many red dresses accessorized with leggings and layered with a fitted turtleneck underneath to keep warm. Like plaid, if head-to-toe red is just too bold, try hints of a scarlet hue with accessories like ballerina flats or handbags.

It is important, however, to follow trends only so far: clothes should always be comfortable and reflect personal style. Nene has input

from friends, parents, magazines and even shows on her favorite Style Network to guide her fashion choices. Nevertheless, she makes sure her outfits are really about her own taste and not just about trends. "I want to look classy and 'put together,'" she says, "you know, so that I look like the best version of me." ■

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