From Fast Fashion to Conscious Influence: How Social Media Can Drive Climate Awareness and Sustainable Lifestyles

Author

Margaux Bonbony

On 5 November 2025, fast-fashion giant Shein opened its first permanent store in Paris, attracting long queues and protests[1]. This event reflects the global appetite for cheap, rapidly produced clothing, which drives the fashion industry's massive environmental impact[2]. Fashion accounts for 2 to 8 percent of global carbon emissions, approximately 10 percent of CO_2 emissions[3], and 141 billion cubic meters of water use annually[4]. This rapid turnover fuelled by social media influencers, not only shapes 85 percent of Gen Z's purchase decisions5, but also contributes to 5.8 million tons of textile waste in the EU and to the growing issue of microplastic pollution[6]. Yet influencers also have the potential to promote sustainability through transparency, ethical brand partnerships, and supportive regulations. This paper examines fast fashion's climate impact and the dual role of social media influencers, without ignoring labour issues where over 430 million people work in fashion, often earning as little as $1.58 per hour[7]. We propose a voluntary Verified Sustainable Influence badge for creators who disclose commercial status, display eco-scores, and allocate affiliate revenue to textile recycling, along with slow-feed algorithms that prioritize sustainable or secondhand items.

---

1 Chia, O. and Kirby, P., 'France moves to suspend Shein website as it opens first store in Paris', *BBC News*, 6 November 2025.

2 United Nations Environment Programme, *The Environmental Costs of Fast Fashion*, 24 November 2022, https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/environmental-costs-fast-fashion.

3 '*Fast fashion trends: The race for speed amid growing ethical and environmental challenges*', 17 April 2025.

4 Uniform Market, *Fast Fashion Statistics 2025*: Environmental and Social Impacts, 2025, https://www.uniformmarket.com/statistics/fast-fashion-statistics.

5 International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), '85% of Gen Z says social media impacts purchase decisions', *ICSC News*, 9 June 2023.

6 European Commission, *EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (COM (2022) 141 final)*, Brussels: European Commission, 30 March 2022.

7 U.S. Department of Labor, *The Exploitation of Garment Workers: Threading the Needle on Fast Fashion*, 21 March 2023

The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion and the Role of Social Media in Its Growth

A) The Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, exposed the severe risks and exploitative labour practices within the textile industry. The building housed five garment factories and its collapse resulted in the deaths of over 1,000 people and injuries to approximately 2,500 others. The tragedy drew international attention to unsafe working conditions and labour exploitation in garment production. In response, British designers launched the Fashion Revolution movement to advocate for ethical and sustainable fashion. Bangladesh is currently the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China. During the 2021–2022 period, the industry was valued at USD 42.6 billion, representing about 82% of the country's total export revenue, with women making up approximately 60.5% of the workforce[8].

The Rana Plaza disaster brought renewed scrutiny to the fast fashion industry, which supplies many global brands such as Mango and Primark. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, fast fashion refers to "trendy clothing that is quickly and cheaply produced to meet ever-changing consumer demand.[9]" This business model has been linked to issues such as child and forced labor, unsafe working environments, low wages, and significant environmental degradation.

Fast fashion contributes to nearly 10% of global carbon emissions and generates an estimated 1.92 million tonnes of textile waste each year. If current trends persist, this figure could rise to 134 million tonnes annually by the end of the decade[10]. Within the European Union, the fashion industry is currently valued at approximately USD 150.82 billion, marking a 10.74% increase since 2024. It is projected to reach USD 291.1 billion by 2032. According to the European Environment Agency, textile purchases in the EU in 2022 produced around 355 kilograms of CO_2 emissions per person[11].

B) Fast Fashion Era: The Rise of The Culture of Overconsumption

On December 3rd, 2024, the rapper Cardi B, followed by over 160 million followers on Instagram, posted a video wearing and promoting Shein clothes. After receiving criticism, she fired back stating "'If someone is offering me $700,000 dollars to do a video, I'm going to do it[12]. Shein currently holds around 50% of the fast fashion market share in the United States and approximately 18% globally, illustrating the brand's significant influence.

---

[8] International Labour Organisation (ILO), 'The Rana Plaza disaster ten years on: What has changed?', April 2023.

[9] 'Rosalez, R., 'The Exploitation of Garment Workers: Threading the Needle on Fast Fashion', *U.S. Department of Labor Blog*, 21 March 2023.

[10] 'Fashion & Textile Waste Statistics & Trends', Waste Direct Blog, published on October 22nd, 2025.

[11] European Parliament, 'Fast fashion: EU laws for sustainable textile consumption', 10 September 2025.

[12] Abdur-Rahman, N., 'Cardi B fires back as fans hate on partnership with controversial fast fashion brand Shein', 4 December 2024.



U.S Fast Fashion Market Share

The rise of influencer marketing has greatly accelerated the fast fashion model. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest have become major sources of fashion inspiration, with brand partnerships and celebrity endorsements amplifying fast fashion's appeal. According to a 2023 survey by the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), 85% of Gen Z respondents (aged 16–26) stated that social media influences their purchasing decisions, with much of this influence stemming from creators and influencers they follow. Similarly, a survey conducted in China found that 82.4% of respondents discovered new products through influencer marketing[13]. Similar global trends show that most consumers discover new products through influencer marketing, reinforced by features like TikTok Shop's commission-based model.[14].

Given this influence, social media plays a central role in shaping consumption habits[15]. Stronger regulation and platform accountability could help shift online fashion culture from promoting overconsumption to encouraging sustainable and climate-conscious behaviours[16].

A New Form of Social and Environmental Activism Emerging Towards a Sustainable Approach of Fashion

Social media influencers have become powerful advocates for ethical and sustainable fashion. Figures like Venetia La Manna use their platforms to expose unethical industry practices and promote awareness of fashion's environmental impact through media appearances and podcasts. Her example, is one of many influencers, taking part in a social medial activism, and how it can affect the lifestyle of many.

---

[13] Li, R., 'The impact of social media influencers on Gen Z's online purchase decisions', January 2025.
[14] Marin-Lopez, X., 'How TikTok Shop is changing the way brands reach customers', 9 January 2025.
[15] Irma International, *Consumers' Choice Behaviour Towards Sustainable Fashion Based on Social Media Influence*, 2024.
[16] Garcia-Ortega, B., Galán-Cubillo, J., Lloréns-Montes, F. J. and de-Miguel-Molina, B., 'Sufficient consumption as a missing link toward sustainability: The case of fast fashion', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 399 (2023), 136678. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.136678.

Social media activism has proven itself to be an efficient form of activism, sometimes more than protests or petitions who tend to have a temporary effect. In fact, social media has proven in the past how it can change (Slow Fashion Movement, Fashion Revolution). Social media is also more accessible than any other form of activism, considering our generation is the most connected, with almost everyone on social media platform[17].

However, despite growing awareness, the Fashion Revolution "What Fuels Fashion?" report shows that 94% of major fashion brands still fail to disclose how they address social and environmental impacts[18]. Even though social media influenced have participated to launch more sustainable trends through 'minimalism aesthetic', encouraging second hand clothing, or capsule wardrobe tutorials, there must be a legal framework to allow transparency and accountability on online platforms. Influencers have the power to push for changes and new initiatives should be considered to counterattack the rise of fast fashion, and push for content promoting sustainable fashion[19]. Encouraging transparency in influencer marketing not only fosters ethical consumption but also contributes to climate change mitigation by reducing demand for high-emission production.

The Power of Policy: Regulating Transparency and Accountability in the Digital Age

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDG 12 on responsible consumption have encouraged countries to integrate sustainability into production and trade[20]. Building on this, the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (2019)[21] and the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan[22] and Strategy for Sustainable Textiles[23] aim to reduce fashion's social and environmental impact. Recent EU measures, such as mandatory textile collection (2025), eco-design rules (2024)[24], and bans on unsold goods destruction (apply from 2026)[25], promote circularity and accountability. However, enforcement remains uneven, especially in major manufacturing regions, limiting global impact[26].
In the digital sphere, France's 2023 influencer law[27] and EU transparency directives require creators to disclose paid partnerships, while the upcoming non-binding Textile Eco-Score (2025)[28] will inform consumers of a product's environmental footprint. Yet, these tools focus mainly on products, not on how fashion is marketed through social media. Influencer and platform accountability for sustainability remains largely absent.

---

[17] Proudfoot, J., 'Venetia La Manna explains how to make every aspect of your life more sustainable', Marie Claire UK, 22 July 2020.
[18] What Fuels Fashion? 2025.
[19] Fashion Media and Sustainability: Encouraging Ethical Consumption via Journalism and Influencers, Fulcrum, 2023.
[20] United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015
[21] United Nations Environment Programme and International Trade Centre, UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion: Press release, 14 March 2019.
[22] European Commission, Circular Economy Action Plan: For a Cleaner and More Competitive Europe, 2020.
[23] European Commission, EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, 30 March 2022.
[24] European Commission, Eco-design for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR), adopted 13 June 2024.
[25] Circularise, 'A Guide to the Eco-design for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR)', 2024.
[26] UNCTAD, Trade and Development Report 2023.
[27] Loi n° 2023-451 du 9 juin 2023 visant à encadrer l'influence commerciale et à lutter contre les dérives des influenceurs sur les réseaux sociaux, 9 June 2023.
[28] Loi n° 2021-1104 du 22 août 2021 portant lutte contre le dérèglement climatique et renforcement de la résilience face à ses effets, JORF n°0196 du 24 août 2021. Décret n° 2025-957 du 6 septembre 2025 relatif aux modalités de calcul et de communication du coût environnemental des produits textiles, JORF n° 0209 du 9 septembre 2025.

Proposed initiatives:

- Introduce a "Slow Feed" option on platforms that prioritizes durable, second-hand, or certified sustainable items.
- Add eco-score labels to sponsored posts, linked to verified product data.
- Create a "Verified Sustainable Influence" badge for creators who disclose partnerships, link eco-scores, and reinvest a share of revenue into recycling.

As Gen Z increasingly demands environmental responsibility (47% expect brands to support sustainability), linking fashion transparency to digital influence can transform social media from a driver of overconsumption into a force for sustainable behaviour and climate-conscious awareness.



Current Eco-Score for Textile Products