

**Investigating Sustainable Consumer Behavior in the Fashion Industry**

By Nikunj Bhimsaria, Patrick Nguyen Burden, Chia Wen Cheng, Erica Pinto

In order to introduce behavior change strategies that can address the less sustainable practices in the fast fashion industry, it is essential to map out the ecosystem of stakeholders involved to surface which stakeholders have the most critical connections and influence needed to affect change. Examining both the end-to-end industry value chain and broader ecosystem of macro forces, the stakeholders across the fast fashion industry consist of a wide range of both formal organizations and the collective force of many individuals, with many of these roles overlapping. At the center of this ecosystem are fast fashion consumers, who make purchasing, use, and disposal decisions related to apparel and serve as the main target audience for industry actors. Beyond consumers, raw material suppliers, manufacturers, fashion brands and designers, thrift stores, advocacy organizations, social media influencers, and many other stakeholders play a role in the fast fashion ecosystem, as represented in *Appendix: Figure A*. While the landscape of stakeholders is quite wide, we focused on three critical stakeholder groups within our interviews: (1) fashion consumers, (2) social media influencers, and (3) responsible fashion advocates. These groups were chosen due to their strong influence in affecting fashion sustainability from both consumption and production perspectives.

Our first stakeholder group is fashion consumers, who broadly includes anyone who purchases and wears clothing. At the center of the fashion ecosystem, consumer behaviors often dictate corporate retail production decisions, influence (and are influenced by) fashion and sustainability movements, and perpetuate social behavioral norms for other shoppers. We focused on a specific segment—young, urban women between the ages of 16-35 who predominantly shop online at frequent rates from price competitive retailers (H&M, Zara, Amazon etc.). Interviewing a former sorority socialite and now expecting mother of two, we uncovered insightful takeaways regarding how individual, group-level, and macro-level factors shaped purchase and clothing use decisions. Notably, we observed that through lifestyle changes, the source of some individual and group-level factors evolve. Our interviewee for instance went through a complete shift from buying a constant array of new one-and-done outfits fit for social outings encouraged by her friends, to now opting for more convenient, affordable choices that allow her to quickly rotate between different sizes throughout her second pregnancy as informed by family and online mom community recommendations. Yet while these lifestyle choices evolve, what remains constant are learnt habits and consumer interactions with social media content and campaigns published by other stakeholders like influencers, corporate brands, and advocacy groups that

push for an awareness of trends, deals, and even ideas around sustainability to shoppers. Competing in nature, these influences are rationalized into everyday decisions that consumers not only have to balance, but also pass onto others. For example, our interviewee “offsets” her fast fashion purchases by occasionally thrifting and donating her clothes, a ritual observed by her shopaholic sisters and an eventual shopper, her two-year-old son. This emphasizes how critical it is to prioritize consumers in any behavioral strategy intended to have cascading effects across the fashion industry.

Our next group of stakeholders are social media influencers, consisting of hobbyist or employed internet content creators who post promotional and entertainment-based shopping content on platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok. Interviewing a full-time content creator with over 167,900 followers on TikTok, we focused on social media influencers due to their direct influence on fashion consumers and their liaising role between fashion brands and shoppers. Content creators have many factors that cause them to do this work, from flexible work schedules to passion for what they create; yet a lot of their impact is often influenced by group-level and macro-level coercion from multiple stakeholders. Influencers are pressured by fashion brands that push for promotional products that sometimes conflict with influencer interests, other content creators that compete for influence and prestige, and a mixture of followers who either want more content-based fashion recommendations or who otherwise harshly critique influencer actions when they heuristically appear unsustainable. All these forces place weight on influencer decisions despite their intended role in “influencing” others. Similar to consumers, influencers are also in a constant state of reconciling these forces in the decisions that they make. For example, although our interviewee is often promoting brands that sell new items, she also promotes shopping second hand, noting that her followers often seek more sustainable, cost effective, and exclusive items not found in traditional retail. Navigating these tensions, influencers are constantly balancing their personal values, their personal income, and the expectations of the industry. Therefore, engagement with content creators is a top priority moving forward, as there are many great opportunities for an impactful intervention through their strong and diverse stakeholder linkages.

Lastly, our focus on responsible fashion advocates was to understand existing organizational and informal interventions to curb the negative environmental and social footprint of fashion. Responsible fashion advocates include NGOs and advocacy organizations like Fashion Revolution, that launch education campaigns, produce research reports and ratings, and mobilize activations within the industry and public policy space to address issues of sustainability. In our interview with a former Fashion Revolution volunteer and aspiring sustainable fashion brand leader, we uncovered

the importance of multi-sector collaborations in addressing sustainable fashion issues from multiple angles. This includes engaging with nearly all stakeholders across and beyond the value chain, from consumers, to large corporate brands and policymakers, and ideally fringe stakeholders like labor unions and manufacturers who have less power to influence standards placed upon them. Specifically, responsible fashion advocates, like our interviewee, employ information-based campaigns that raise awareness to consumers via social media like *#WhoMadeMyClothes*, integrate educational activations at fashion industry events, build reporting mechanisms like the Fashion Transparency Index that keep fashion brands accountable, and mobilize people for policy change to enact new regulations like the *Garment Worker Protection Act*. These strategies share common traits of delivering transparent, credible information to build new relationships and understandings around how people use, produce, and dispose of clothes, and signal the incredible significance in considering cross-stakeholder strategies and tactics for empowering traditionally overlooked stakeholders by using the convening potential and influential capabilities of responsible fashion advocates.

From the data gathered through stakeholder interviews, we further learned how complex the fashion industry is, with strong multi-directional relationships where no one stakeholder group can easily influence others unilaterally. While the share of sustainability-conscious consumers is rising, it can be difficult for consumers to act on this desire when influencers and fashion brands are constantly promoting a variety of, and at times conflicting, content. Consumer preferences change not only with new and emerging trends, but also with evolving personal needs and perspectives. As such, it is important to consider the economic forces at play as well. For a lot of consumers, fast fashion might be the only affordable avenue available. Although we may be allured to simply encourage people to consume less, there are potential consequences for personal self expression and the jobs and livelihoods of those who support the fashion industry. Despite these complexities, there is one clear constant force throughout: consumers are influenced by the advertisements, campaigns, and social media content they consume, for better or for worse. It is apparent that within, between, and beyond the three stakeholder groups we focused on — fashion consumers, social media influencers, and responsible fashion advocates — that there are many driving and restraining forces to uncover. Determining these forces will lead to potential interventions that can better educate and serve consumers, empowering them to understand their preferences, make more sustainable decisions, and encourage other stakeholders to do the same.

## Appendix

Figure A.

