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The Sustainable-Fashion Attention Gap

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ABSTRACT

Ask why a five-minute video urging viewers to buy less clothing spreads to a few hundred people while a ninety-second fast fashion haul spreads to a few million. The easy answer is that audiences simply do not care enough about sustainability to make it entertaining. This review sets that answer aside, not because it has been disproven. The fact is no comparative measurement anywhere in the literature tests it and asks instead what would have to be true structurally for a gap of this size to appear even if audience interest were held constant. Four bodies of scholarship, rarely read together, supply an answer. Fashion's industrial base is organized to produce garments, and footage, at a pace no craft-based alternative can match (Niinimäki et al.; Fletcher; Todeschini et al.). Short-form platforms rank content on engagement signals well documented in general, though no source examined here isolates sustainability content as a category subject to that ranking; this review treats the sustainability-specific version of the claim as a borrowed premise rather than a demonstrated finding (Vladimirova et al.; Klug et al.). Influencer income runs substantially through affiliate commission, and the expected payout per post, a function of commission rate, price, conversion, and restock frequency, plausibly rewards constant fast-fashion promotion over slower sustainable alternatives, placing a creator's convictions and a creator's rent in genuine tension (Duffy; Abidin). Consumers holding real environmental concern keep buying fast fashion because managing that contradiction costs less, psychologically, than changing the habit does, not because changing it is unavailable to them (Festinger; Cairns et al.). Together, these four pressures would compound one another rather than merely coexist, where each holds. This review specifies which parts of that conditional are already evidenced, which are premises adopted for argument's sake, and which studies would close the distance between the two.

A NOTE ON METHOD

This is a narrative, thematically organized around literature review rather than a systematic one, and that distinction is stated here rather than left implicit. Sources were identified through a combination of citation-chaining from Vladimirova et al.'s systematic review of the social -media-and-sustainable-fashion literature, targeted searches in Google Scholar and the databases underlying it for terms including "algorithmic visibility," “TikTok recommendation,” “affiliate marketing influencer,” "aspirational labor,” “attitude-behavior gap sustainable consumption,” and cognitive dissonance ethical consumption,” and manual retrieval of the specific empirical studies (Kim and Ko; De Veirman et al.; Leenders; Ge; Lou and Yuan; Cairns et al.) needed to support claims about mechanism rather than topic prevalence. No formal inclusion or exclusion criteria, data range, or search-string protocol was applied, and no PRISMA-style

flow was generated. The review does not claim the comprehensiveness that would require. Fourteen sources anchor the argument's four themes, which are supplemented in the revision by nine additional sources adding algorithmic visibility, creator-economy labor, and the attitude-behavior gap specifically, in response to reviewer comments identifying thin and uneven support in the first submission. The source base remains concentrated in English-language scholarship on Anglo-American and European platforms and consumers, a limitation discussed further below.

OPENING: AN ATTENTION GAP IN SEARCH OF AN EXPLANATION

Fast-fashion "haul" videos are widely reported to rack up large view counts within hours of posting. By contrast, content urging viewers to buy less, repair more, or interrogate the ethics of a five-dollar T-shirt is widely reported to stay small. Neither claim is measured in what follows. Both are treated here as a starting premise, held by platform commentators and echoed by parts of literature reviewed, and the status of that premise is addressed directly rather than quietly assumed. The conventional explanation for a gap of this kind reaches for audience taste: viewers, on this account, are not interested enough in sustainability to make it watchable. This review argues that the explanation is not so much wrong as untestable in its current form, and that it arrives too early, before four independent bodies of scholarship, spanning industrial ecology, platform studies, creator-economy research, and consumer psychology, have been allowed to describe a system in which a gap of exactly this kind, if it exists, would be the predictable output of structure rather than of demand.

Four pressures organize the argument that follows. The first is architectural. Short-form video platforms rank content using signals like watch time, completion, and rewatch, and research on how creators experience and adapt to those signals is treated here as suggestive of a bias toward immediately engaging content, not as proof of a sustainability-specific bias Klug et al.; Bucher; Cotter). The second is financial. Influencer business models run substantially on affiliate commission, and commission economics plausibly reward inexpensive, high-conversion, frequently restocked goods over slower or costlier alternatives, which is a claim built from creator-economy scholarship rather than from the single trade blog that supported it in an earlier draft (Duffy; Abidin; Cunningham and Craig). The third is psychological. People who are genuinely troubled by fast fashion's environmental record keep buying it anyway, and the cognitive routines that make this possible can be cheaper than behavior change rather than constituting an alternative that makes behavior change impossible (Festinger; Cairns et al.; Vermeir and Verbeke).

Taking any one of these pressures on its own risks reproducing exactly the individualizing logic this review means to question, since it is easy to blame the audience, the algorithm, or the creator in isolation and much harder to see what happens when all three point the same way at once. What follows develops each pressure in turn, names a real disagreement inside the literature rather than smoothing it away, and closes by specifying what remains to be shown before the argument can move from a plausible structural account to a demonstrated one.

PART ONE: THE INDUSTRY THAT NEEDS TO MOVE FAST

Before turning to social media at all, it helps to establish something about the industry generating the footage in the first place. Fashion's environmental toll is not primarily a matter of individual purchasing choices but a property of an industrial system built to manufacture and move garments at scale. Niinimäki et al., working from life-cycle assessment data spanning the textile and fashion value chain, report that the industry produces upward of ninety-two million tonnes of textile waste each year. Also, the industry, on the more defensible of two figures the paper itself settles on, accounts for eight to ten percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, or roughly four to five billion tons annually. A looser figure of "up to ten percent of global pollution" appears in the same paper's abstract and should be read as the less precise, upper-bound version of the claim rather than as an independent finding (Niinimäki et al. 189). Their central claim is not that awareness alone can address this. It's the reverse. Meaningful change entails structural changes to the business model itself, including what they call "a deceleration of manufacturing" together with sustainable business practices across the supply chain, alongside rather than instead of changes in consumer behavior (Niinimäki et al. 197).

Fletcher extends this into conceptual territory, arguing that speed in fast fashion is not an incidental byproduct of the business but a deliberate lever pulled to grow sales. This reframes pace itself as strategy rather than as a passive response to consumer demand (Fletcher 259). Here, Todeschini et al. supply the missing piece on the other side of the ledger. Their systematic review and accompanying case studies of circular and slow-fashion entrepreneurship find that founders trying to build sustainable alternatives face steep structural headwinds, including underdeveloped consumer education, immature reverse-logistics systems for handling post-consumer waste, and supply chains still priced around the assumptions of fast-fashion production. These friction points actively bottleneck the scalability of circular business models regardless of how well-resourced or well-intentioned their founders are (Todeschini et al. 762). These three sources converge on a claim this review needs early. Overconsumption is a structural feature of the fashion industry. It's not an accident of it. Niinimäki et al. establish the physical scale of the problem. Fletcher supplies the vocabulary for treating speed as a business strategy. Todeschini et al. show that the same strategy disadvantages sustainable competitors trying to operate within it. However, the three studies approach the issue from different perspectives, diverging in method and level of analysis: industrial ecology, design theory, and entrepreneurship research. That gap matters. Knowing that the runs on speed and volume explains why so much fast-fashion content exists to be posted in the first place. However, that knowledge alone says nothing yet about whether platforms distributing that content favor it over slower alternatives. That is the question the next section addresses.

PART TWO: WHAT THE FEED IS BUILT TO REWARD

If fast fashion's dependence on speed is embedded in its industrial structure, the question this section has to settle is whether short-form platforms amplify that dependence. The peer-reviewed literature does not yet settle this for sustainability content specifically. Stating that limitation up front changes how the rest

of this section should be read. What follows lays out what is known about ranking mechanics in general, what creators believe about those mechanics, and what is known about the kinds of content that perform well commercially. This review treats the claim that the system penalizes explanatory sustainability content as an assumption, not a proven result.

Vladimirova et al.'s systematic review of ninety two academic studies on social media and sustainable fashion consumption found that scholarship was weighted overwhelmingly toward brand marketing and influencer revenue models aimed at driving sales, with independent sustainability discourse and anti-consumption advocacy left relatively marginal and understudied (Vladimirova et al. 182-184). This provides evidence of where research and commercial attention have been focused. It is not a measurement of how any platform's recommender system actually ranks content, and Vladimirova et al. makes no claim otherwise. Evidence closer to ranking behavior comes from Klug et al.'s mixed-method study of TikTok, which found that engagement, including likes, comments, and shares, raises the odds that a video is pushed into trending distribution. At the same time, posting time shapes visibility more than the hashtag strategies creators tend to emphasize. The same study documents creators building folk theories of the algorithm from this feedback. Bucher's concept of the "algorithmic imaginary" frames this as a general feature of how users come to understand opaque recommender systems (Klug et al.; Bucher). Cotter's account of "playing the visibility game" and Gillespie's broader work on platform curation describes the same dynamic from the creator's side of the screen. Visibility becomes something creators attempt to win through legible, repeatable engagement, possibly favoring content that produces an immediate response over content asking viewers to sit with an explanation.

None of this literature isolates sustainability content as its down category. None measures completion rate or rewatch frequency directly for explanatory versus hedonic fashion content. What it supports is the narrow claim that engagement-based ranking exists and rewards immediacy in general, from which the sustainability-specific version is extrapolated rather than demonstrated. Kim and Ko's structural equation model of luxury-brand social-media marketing is frequently read as demonstrating that entertainment, inactivity, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth value straightforwardly convert into purchase intention. The actual model, however, shows a more complicated relationship. The five marketing activities positively predict three customer-equity drivers, including value equity, relationship equity, and brand equity. At the next stage, brand equity has a significant negative effect on customer equity, while value equity and relationship equity show no significant effect on it. Only value equity and brand equity go on to predict purchase intention directly (Kim and Ko 1483-1485). What survives this correction is narrower than "engaging content converts to purchase." Engagement-style marketing activities build certain immediate brand perceptions, some of which help and one of which cuts against the very equity measure the model was constructed to explain.

McCormick and Livett's qualitative interviews with young online fashion shoppers make a more modest and better-supported point in a related direction: consumers respond not only to functional product information but also to what the authors call "aesthetic fashion information," content that produces a hedonic, emotionally engaging response McCormick and Livett 33). Sustainable fashion content, which

may need to carry supply-chain claims, certification standards, or lifecycle comparisons, can be less naturally suited to delivering that kind of immediate payoff. That is a potential source of friction, not proof of algorithmic suppression. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders add a complication: their experimental work on Instagram influencer marketing found that while influencers with larger followings read as more likable, promoting a "divergent," non-mainstream product to a mass audience reduces that product's perceived uniqueness and brand attitude (De Veirman et al. 810). Applied to sustainability content, this raises the possibility that a values-driven creator who succeeds in building a large platform may find that scale itself erodes the specialized positioning that made the content distinctive in the first place. From product divergence to creator positioning, that extension is this review's own inference rather than De Veirman et al.'s finding, and is offered as a mechanism worth testing rather than as something already shown.

Therefore, these sources describe engagement-based ranking as a real and reasonably documented feature of short-form platforms, describe hedonic and aesthetic content as reliably engaging in the marketing literature, and describe at least one mechanism by which scale can penalize niche positioning. They do not establish that sustainability content specifically is algorithmically suppressed relative to fast-fashion content. The defensible version of the claim is narrower. Platforms reward immediate, legible engagement signals. On independent grounds, sustainability content may be less likely to generate those signals quickly. A structural disadvantage is therefore plausible and worth testing directly. The literature reviewed here has not yet performed that test. Closing the gap would require content-analytic comparison of engagement metrics across matched sustainability and fast-fashion samples, using the kind of platform research-API access Klug et al. demonstrate is available for TikTok.

PART THREE: THE CREATOR'S ARITHMETIC

A sustainability-minded creator who wants to educate an audience also has to eat, and this section sets the persuasive case for influencer-led education against the financial arithmetic that governs how a creator actually gets paid. Leenders's experimental study, grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, found that consumers' attitudes toward valuing their own clothing directly and positively predict sustainable purchase intentions, and that influencers can serve as accessible, peer-level sources of the practical knowledge needed to shop more ethically (Leenders 19-21). Ge's research on Generation Z consumers similarly found that influencer expertise, transparency, and value alignment significantly raise trust and purchase intention toward eco-friendly apparel brands (Ge 128-131). Lou and Yuan's model of influencer persuasion is often read as simply adding a mechanism on top of these two findings, but it does not converge with them cleanly: their significant predictors of follower trust in branded content were informational value, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived similarity to the follower, and expertise, which their model also tested, was not among them (Lou and Yuan 58-66).

This is a genuine disagreement rather than a cumulative sequence, and it matters here specifically because expertise is plausibly the one asset a sustainability educator has that a haul creator does not. If expertise does not reliably build trust, the hope that credible educators can out-compete entertainment-first creators

on trust alone is weaker than a purely cumulative reading of the influencer literature would suggest. The same tension reappears against Part Two's use of Kim and Ko: Lou and Yuan's significant predictors include informational value but not entertainment value, which cuts against, rather than supports, a hedonic-payoff account of what makes branded content persuasive. Both studies are retained here because the disagreement is informative in its own right, not because the material reviewed lets this review resolve it; what a sustainability creator's expertise and informational depth can and cannot do for trust and reach respectively remains a genuinely open question.

Set against this contested but real persuasive potential is a structural account of influencer income that, in an earlier draft of this review, rested chiefly on a single Medium listicle. That support has been replaced. Vladimirova et al.'s review found that influencer activity in the sustainability space is frequently absorbed into conventional, sales-driven marketing frameworks (Vladimirova et al. 196), which speaks to how existing scholarship has been coded rather than to commission structures themselves, and is cited here for that narrower purpose only. The stronger source for the economic claim is the creator-economy literature proper. Duffy's ethnographic account of "aspirational labor" documents a persistent, empirically grounded gap between the visibility creators achieve and the income that visibility converts into, with only a small share of creators earning a stable living from platform work and most others absorbing uncompensated labor on the hope of eventual conversion (Duffy). Abidin's work on Instagram influencers and Cunningham and Craig's account of social media entertainment as an industry describe the same landscape from the standpoint of commercial visibility and industrial organization respectively: influencer income on major platforms runs heavily through affiliate commission and brand-partnership arrangements, in which creators earn a share of the sales their links generate, and sustaining income under a commission model generally rewards frequent, high-conversion posting over slow or infrequent content. That frequency-dependence is stated here as a plausible corollary of the affiliate model itself, not as a separately cited empirical finding, since none of the sources above measures posting frequency directly.

The sharper and more original version of this claim is that what governs a creator’s incentive is expected revenue per post. A product of commission rate, item price, conversion rate, and restock frequency, rather than commission rate considered on its own. Fast fashion’s low prices and constant, rapid restocking plausibly raise both the conversion and frequency terms relative to sustainable, secondhand, or made-to-order goods. These often carry higher price points and restock more slowly. Framed this way, the claim is testable as the product of four specific terms rather than asserted as a general disadvantage. The next empirical step is to test those terms directly by comparing affiliate-network rate cards, product prices, conversion rates, and restock frequencies across fast-fashion and sustainable-fashion categories. This review does not perform that analysis. Instead, it specifies the variables and comparison needed to test the proposed revenue mechanism.

In this sense, the contradiction this section describes is not that influencers are insincere about sustainability. It’s that sincerity and solvency pull in different directions under a commission structure whose effects have not been directly measured. A further limitation running through the persuasion-focused studies is that Leenders, Ge, and Lou and Yuan all measure short-term attitudes or

purchase intentions rather than long-term behavior change. None can establish whether influencer-driven sustainability messaging actually reduces total consumption or simply adds a thin layer of "conscious purchases" on top of existing high-volume shopping habits. Influencer credibility, where it exists and for the specific followers it reaches, may be a necessary condition for moving sustainable fashion content toward wider circulation. Nothing in the literature reviewed here shows that it is sufficient to overcome the commercial architecture within which creators operate.

PART FOUR: THE CHEAPER EXIT FROM DISCOMFORT

The last pressure operates inside the consumer rather than on the platform or the creator, and a substantial body of research documents that professed environmental concern does not reliably predict sustainable purchasing behavior. Vermeir and Verbeke's survey-based study of sustainable food consumption offers one of the clearest empirical statements of this attitude-intention gap. Positive attitudes towards sustainability do not translate reliably into purchase intention. The gap is driven substantially by perceived availability, which means that consumers with positive attitudes who don't believe sustainable options are readily available form weaker intentions regardless of how they actually feel (Vermeir and Verbeke 169, 189). Applied to fashion, this raises the possibility that part of any attitude-behavior gap is structural and availability-driven rather than purely motivational, which is a possibility the psychological literature considered here does not rule out.

The explanatory mechanism invoked most often in this literature is Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, and this revision corrects a misstatement of it that survived into an earlier draft. Festinger's own account names several routes of dissonance, one of which is changing the behavior itself. The theory does not exclude behavior change as an option, and it was inaccurate to state that dissonance is resolved by adjusting belief "rather than" changing behavior (Festinger 3, 18). The more defensible claim is that behavior change can be the more costly route to dissonance reduction, while price, convenience, and the ready availability of rationalizing beliefs make cognitive adjustment comparatively cheap. Cairns, Ritch, and Bereziat's qualitative study of millennial fashion consumers supplies exactly this evidence. Consumers report genuine irritation and guilt when purchasing fast fashion but manage that discomfort through strategies such as downplaying environmental harm or emphasizing a garment's practical necessity, which permits continued purchasing at a lower psychological cost than changing habits would exact (Cairns et al. 1268-1272). Read as a claim about relative cost rather than about the unavailability of an alternative, the argument survives the correction and becomes stronger if anything. The same consumer may occasionally opt for less consumption or second-hand goods despite the higher cost, but these exceptions do not invalidate the broader pattern.

This literature does not simply confirm what the influencer and platform research assumes, and getting the relationship right matters. Leenders, Ge, and Lou and Yuan proceed on something closer to the assumption that raising awareness and building trust in a message can shift intention, which is why they measure trust and intention as outcomes. Cairns et al.'s findings do not confirm that assumption. They complicate it, showing that awareness and even genuine concern can coexist with unchanged purchasing

behavior once a low-cost dissonance-reduction strategy is available. The persuasion-focused influencer studies show how trust in a message may be built. The dissonance literature explains why a trusted message can still fail to change behavior. The barrier is not always informational but can be a matter of relative cost. Source credibility cannot substitute for a consumer's willingness to bear the higher cost of changing behavior over the cost of rationalizing it.

A limitation of this literature is its reliance on self-reported attitudes, which may be vulnerable to social-desirability bias, while Cairns et al. also rely on a small qualitative sample that limits the extent to which their findings can be generalized. Respondents may therefore report greater environmental concern than their actual shopping habits would suggest. Nor can these studies establish how dissonance-reduction strategies interact with pacing and visual design of short-form video feeds in real time, which is precisely the junction Part Two leaves unresolved.

SYNTHESIS: FOUR PRESSURES. TWO ASSUMPTIONS.

Considered separately, each of the preceding four sections offers a partial, and in two cases only conditionally supported, account of why a sustainable-fashion attention gap might be expected. The first is an industry built on speed, producing garments and therefore potential content at a pace no craft-based alternative can match. The second is a platform architecture plausibly, but not yet demonstrably, biased toward immediately engaging content, alongside an influencer economy structurally exposed to fast-fashion incentives whose exact financial effect has not been measured. The third is a consumer psychology equipped to manage guilt at lower cost than behavior change requires. Rather than leave the connections between these four levels as an implied inference, they are set out here directly, together with the evidentiary status of each link, so that a reader can see which parts of the chain are demonstrated and which are adopted for the sake of argument.

- Manufacturing feeds the pipeline. Fast fashion's speed-based business model generates a continuous stream of cheap, rapidly rotating inventory, and with it, a continuous stream of potential content material. This link is well supported (Niinimäki et al.; Fletcher; Todeschini et al.), and little further evidence is needed to support it.
- Ranking rewards immediacy. Engagement-ranked platforms amplify immediate, low-friction content in general, and this half of the claim is reasonably well supported (Klug et al.; Bucher; Cotter; Gillespie). That sustainability content specifically is disadvantaged by this ranking is a further, sustainability-specific step that this review adopts as a premise rather than a demonstrated finding. The distinction between those two halves of the link should not be collapsed.
- Commission economics select for frequency. Affiliate-commission structures possibly push creators toward high-frequency fast-fashion promotion through an expected-revenue-per-post mechanism that this review specifies as commission rate, price point, conversion rate, and restock frequency, but has not directly measured (Duffy; Abidin; Cunningham and Craig).

- The feed a consumer actually sees is saturated. If the first three links hold to whatever degree they hold, the feed a typical consumer encounters may become saturated with fast, hedonic, commercially driven content. This link is not independently established. Its strength inherits directly from the three links above it.
- Discomfort is absorbed rather than corrected. Consumers can manage the resulting discomfort at a lower psychological cost than changing their behavior requires. Therefore exposure does not necessarily self-correct on its own. This link is well supported once correctly stated (Festinger; Cairns et al.; Vermeir and Verbeke).

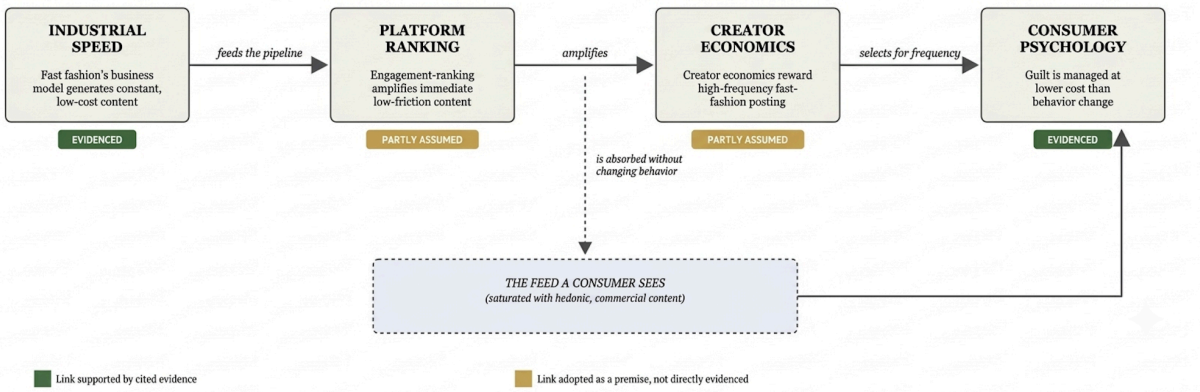


Figure 1. The four-level model, with each link's evidentiary status marked directly. Solid arrows and green labels mark links supported by cited evidence; the dashed path and amber labels mark links this review adopts as premises rather than demonstrated findings.

Three problems remain that this revision names rather than resolves. First, the attention gap that motivates the entire inquiry, as an earlier reader rightly pointed out, is never itself measured here. The opening claim that haul videos accumulate views quickly while sustainability content struggles to circulate is asserted rather than cited. Closing that gap requires content-analytic comparison of actual engagement metrics across sustainability and fast-fashion hashtags. This exists in adjacent literatures, and Klug et al.'s TikTok dataset methodology is directly adaptable to this purpose, but has not been conducted for this specific comparison here. Second, "virality" is used loosely across at least three distinct senses: total reach, velocity of reach, and the ratio of shares to views, which have different determinants. Explanatory content might plausibly underperform on velocity while performing acceptably on share ratio. That's a possibility that would complicate rather than defeat the thesis and that future work should distinguish rather than collapse.

Third, and most seriously, the outcome this review explains, circulation or reach, is not the outcome most of its quantitative sources measure. Kim and Ko measure customer equity and purchase intention. De Veirman et al. measure brand attitude and perceived uniqueness. Leenders, Ge, Lou and Yuan measure trust and purchase intention. Cairns et al. describe purchasing behavior. None measure views, completion, or shares directly. The link this review relies on- that purchase intention and brand engagement are correlated with, or at least plausibly precede, content circulation- is a reasonable inference given the

reviewer's own account of affiliate-driven incentives, but it is an inference this review is making rather than a finding any cited source reports. It should be read as such throughout.

It is worth restating a genuine tension in the literature on its own terms rather than dissolving it. The persuasion-focused influencer studies (Leenders; Ge; Lou and Yuan) are cautiously optimistic about social media's capacity to shift sustainable intention. The structural and psychological literature (Vladimirova et al.; Cairns et al.; Vermeir and Verbeke) is considerably more skeptical about whether that intention survives contact with either the platform economy or the consumer's own dissonance-management repertoire. On inspection, the two claims are not actually in conflict once the level of analysis is specified. Influencer-driven education can and plausibly does raise individual-level purchase intention among the followers it reaches. However, platform ranking, creator-income structures, and the low relative cost of dissonance reduction can simultaneously limit how far that intention travels toward either changed aggregate behavior or increased content circulation. Stated this way, the disagreement is a difference in what each literature measures, individual attitude change versus aggregate income, rather than a straightforward empirical contradiction. That difference is the condition under which each body of work is right.

CONSEQUENCES: FOR RESEARCHERS, BRANDS, AND REGULATORS

For research

Three gaps follow directly from the limitations named above rather than from a general call for "more research." The field needs content-analytic studies that directly compare engagement metrics, including views, completion rate, share ratio, and time-to-peak across matched samples of sustainability-focused and fast-fashion short-form videos, using platform research API access of the kind demonstrated by Klug et al. on TikTok. It needs longitudinal studies that track actual purchasing volume and garment lifespan rather than short-term purchase intention to determine whether influencer-driven sustainability messaging produces genuine reductions in consumption or simply redirects spending towards greenwashed products within existing high-volume habits. And it needs to engage directly with deinfluencing and anti-consumption content, which Vladimirova et al. flag as an emerging and understudied area and which offers the single best available test care for this review's thesis. If deinfluencing shares sustainability's anti-consumption message and has at times achieved substantial reach, it may circulate differently from other sustainability content. That difference would help show which of this review's mechanisms is doing the most work.

For brands and creators

An earlier draft of this review recommended that sustainable fashion brands combine transparent educational content with the same hedonic, aesthetically engaging presentation that drives fast-fashion virality, on the reasoning that doing so lowers the cognitive burden of sustainability messaging without abandoning its substance. That recommendation sits in real tension with the review's own argument, since the hedonic form is precisely what four preceding sections identify as the engine of overconsumption, and

the research implications above warn against messaging that merely adds a conscious-purchase veneer to unchanged volume. The recommendation survives that tension only if form and function are separated explicitly: adopting an engaging visual grammar to carry a message that argues for buying less and buying durably is different from adopting that grammar to sell more units faster, and brands attempting the former should treat conversion-rate and repeat-purchase metrics, not view count alone, as the measure of whether the strategy has actually decoupled engaging form from consumption-driving function.

For platforms and policymakers

Meaningful progress plausibly requires intervention at the level of platform design and regulation, but the specific instruments available should be named rather than gestured at. The European Union's Digital Services Act already requires very large online platforms to disclose the main parameters used in their recommender systems and to offer users at least one non-profiling-based feed option, a live mechanism through which the kind of algorithmic ranking discussed above could, in principle, be made more transparent and studied directly rather than inferred. On green-claims regulation specifically, the picture is more unsettled than a policy recommendation can responsibly ignore: the European Commission announced its intention to withdraw the proposed Green Claims Directive in June 2025 amid concerns about compliance burdens on small enterprises, and as of this writing the proposal's status remains formally unresolved. The Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition Directive, by contrast, is already in force, restricts generic and unsubstantiated environmental claims, and required member-state transposition by March 2026, making it the more immediately relevant instrument for any claim about affiliate-driven "sustainable" fashion promotion specifically. Any policy recommendation this review makes should be anchored to that Directive and to the Digital Services Act's existing transparency provisions rather than to a green-claims instrument whose future remains uncertain.

THE EDGES OF THIS ARGUMENT

This review draws on fourteen core sources across five disciplines. Part One rests on three peer-reviewed sources and is the best-supported section of the paper. Part Three, the review's most original claim, rests on a thinner and more mixed base even after this revision's additions. Three limitations bear most heavily on the conclusions and are stated here directly rather than left implicit. First, the algorithmic mechanism named in Part Two is adopted as a premise informed by platform-adjacent research rather than established by peer-reviewed evidence specific to sustainability content. Thus, readers should weigh this review’s conclusions accordingly. Second, this review explains circulation and reach, while most of its quantitative sources measure purchase intention, trust, and brand attitude. The link between intention and circulation is therefore this review’s own inference. Third, the literature drawn on is concentrated in English-language scholarship on Anglo-American and European platforms and consumers. Thus, the conclusions offered here should not be read as generalizing beyond that context without further evidence.

TABLE 1: SOURCES BY DISCIPLINE, METHOD, SAMPLE, AND OUTCOME MEASURED

The table below lays out, source by source, what each of the fourteen core sources anchoring this review's four central sections actually is and actually measures. It is included so the outcome mismatch discussed above, that this review explains circulation and reach while most of its quantitative sources measure attitude, trust, or purchase intention, is visible at a glance rather than something a reader has to reconstruct from scattered prose.

Source	Discipline	Method	Sample	Outcome measured
Niinimäki et al.	Industrial ecology	Life-cycle assessment / synthesis	Global textile industry data	Waste volume; emissions share
Fletcher	Design theory	Conceptual / theoretical	N/A	No empirical outcome (reframes speed as strategy)
Todeschini et al.	Entrepreneurship	Systematic review + case studies	Circular / slow-fashion startups	Structural barriers to scaling
Vladimirova et al.	Media & marketing studies	Systematic literature review	92 published studies	Distribution of research attention (not platform behavior)
Klug et al.	Platform / computational social science	Mixed-method (survey + platform data)	TikTok users and creators	Predictors of trending placement
Bucher	Media studies	Theoretical / conceptual	N/A	No empirical outcome (“algorithmic imaginary”)
Cotter	Media & communication studies	Qualitative interviews	Instagram influencers	Visibility-management strategies
Gillespie	Media studies	Theoretical / critical analysis	N/A	No empirical outcome (platform curation)
Kim and Ko	Marketing	Structural equation model (survey)	Luxury-brand social media users	Customer equity; purchase intention
McCormick and Livett	Marketing	Qualitative interviews	Young online fashion shoppers	Response to hedonic / aesthetic content
De Veirman et al.	Marketing / advertising	Experimental	Instagram influencer-marketing participants	Brand attitude; perceived uniqueness
Leenders	Consumer behavior	Experimental (master's thesis)	Consumers (Theory of Planned Behavior)	Purchase intention
Ge	Marketing	Survey	Generation Z consumers	Trust; purchase intention
Lou and Yuan	Advertising	Survey / structural model	Social media users	Trust in branded content

Source	Discipline	Method	Sample	Outcome measured
Duffy	Media & labor studies	Ethnographic	Content creators	Income / visibility gap ("aspirational labor")
Abidin	Media & cultural studies	Ethnographic / qualitative	Instagram influencers	Commercial visibility practices
Cunningham and Craig	Media industries	Industry analysis	Social media entertainment sector	Industrial organization
Festinger	Psychology	Foundational theory	N/A	No empirical outcome (dissonance-reduction routes)
Cairns et al.	Consumer psychology	Qualitative study	Millennial fashion consumers	Guilt-management strategies; purchasing behavior
Vermeir and Verbeke	Consumer behavior	Survey	Sustainable-food consumers	Attitude–intention gap; purchase intention

Fletcher Design theory Conceptual / N/A No empirical outcome theoretical (reframes speed as strategy)

Todeschini et Entrepreneurship Systematic Circular / Structural barriers to al. review + case slow-fashion startups scaling studies

Vladimirova Media & marketing Systematic 92 published studies Distribution of et al. studies literature research attention (not review platform behavior)

Klug et al. Platform / Mixed-method TikTok users and Predictors of trending computational (survey + creators placement social science platform data)

Bucher Media studies Theoretical / N/A No empirical outcome conceptual ("algorithmic imaginary")

Cotter Media & Qualitative Instagram influencers Visibility-management communication interviews strategies studies

Gillespie Media studies Theoretical / N/A No empirical outcome critical (platform curation) analysis

Kim and Ko Marketing Structural Luxury-brand social Customer equity; equation model media users purchase intention (survey)

McCormick and Marketing Qualitative Young online fashion Response to hedonic / Livett interviews shoppers aesthetic content

De Veirman et Marketing / Experimental Instagram Brand attitude; al. advertising influencer-marketing perceived uniqueness participants

Leenders Consumer behavior Experimental Consumers (Theory of Purchase intention (master's Planned Behavior) thesis)

Ge Marketing Survey Generation Z consumers Trust; purchase intention

Lou and Yuan Advertising Survey / Social media users Trust in branded structural content model

Duffy Media & labor Ethnographic Content creators Income / visibility gap studies ("aspirational labor")

Abidin Media & cultural Ethnographic / Instagram influencers Commercial visibility studies qualitative practices

Cunningham Media industries Industry Social media Industrial organization and Craig analysis entertainment sector

Festinger Psychology Foundational N/A No empirical outcome theory (dissonance-reduction routes)

Cairns et al. Consumer Qualitative Millennial fashion Guilt-management psychology study consumers strategies; purchasing behavior

Vermeir and Consumer behavior Survey Sustainable-food Attitude--intention Verbeke consumers gap; purchase intention

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Table 1. Note that only three sources (Klug et al., in part, plus adjacent platform-transparency reporting cited in the Consequences section) speak to engagement, reach, or ranking directly; the remainder speak to attitude, trust, intention, or income, which is the mismatch named throughout this revision.

CLOSING: A HYPOTHESIS, NOT A VERDICT

Sustainable fashion's apparent difficulty achieving viral reach on short-form platforms is often framed as evidence that audiences simply do not care enough about the garment industry's environmental and labor record to make the topic entertaining. This review has argued that the framing is premature rather than demonstrably wrong. The gap it explains has not been measured here or comparatively measured elsewhere, as far as this review has found. What this review offers instead is a structural account of why such a gap would be expected if it exists. Fast fashion's industrial dependence on speed manufactures a

constant supply of low-cost content (Niinimäki et al.; Fletcher; Todeschini et al.). Platforms reward immediate, low-friction engagement in ways that plausibly, though not yet demonstrably, disadvantage explanatory sustainability content (Vladimirova et al.; Klug et al.; Bucher; Kim and Ko; McCormick and Livett; De Veirman et al.). Affiliate-commission economics plausibly make fast-fashion promotion the more financially rational strategy for creators, through a mechanism this view specifies but has not directly measured (Duffy; Abidin; Cunningham and Craig; Leenders; Ge; Lou and Yuan). Consumers manage any resulting guilt at a lower psychological cost than changing their behavior would require, a claim that is well-evidenced once correctly stated (Festinger; Cairns et al.; Vermeir and Verbeke).

On the evidence reviewed here, none of these four pressures is established beyond reasonable challenge, and two of them are explicitly premises this review adopts rather than findings it has shown. What the review has established is narrower but still worth having. The conventional explanation of audience indifference is not the only or even the most parsimonious account available. A structural alternative can also be specified precisely enough to be tested. The attention gap facing sustainable fashion content, if it exists in the form this review has assumed, is not obviously a failure of the message. Whether the gap is a structural feature of the system remains to be tested directly. This review argues that it plausibly is. The tests are specified above: content-analytic comparison of engagement metrics, commission-rate documentation across product categories, and longitudinal tracking of purchasing volume rather than intention.

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