

Renting Style: Exploring Sustainable Fashion Social Media Influencers' Fashion Rental Practice

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Abstract

Background scientific research

The Circular Economy and Fashion Rental: There has been a plethora of articles in recent years proposing that the fashion industry needs to shift from a linear process to a circular one (e.g. Ritch et al., 2021; Adreza de et al.) and this would significantly reduce environmental impact (Gyde and McNeil, 2021). The premise of Circular Fashion according to the Sustainable Fashion Forum (www.sustainablefashionforum.com) in simple terms is, to reduce the number of natural resources utilised to make clothing and accessories, to prevent items going to landfill as waste and making new materials out of old materials, thus creating a 'closed loop system'. A circular economy aims to create a zero-waste principle while addressing the problems of over production and over consumption, with the intention to keep products in the lifecycle for as long as possible (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022). As well as recycling, repairing and reselling (Ritch et al., 2021) fashion rental services, also offer potential extension of the lifecycle of garments and accessories (Borg et al., 2020, Andreza de, 2021). However, the environmental impact of increased laundering, repair and transport of these items within rental services is not fully understood and eventually the items will 'wear out' (Gyde and McNeill, 2021). Researchers report that the majority of fashion companies mostly follow the linear fashion model. This process involves the use of resources, companies makes products, consumers use briefly (for some fast fashion items, three times or less) consumers throw away, and repeat the process creating excessive waste (Borg et al., 2020). Renting fashion beyond occasion wear (such as weddings) is worthy of further investigation (Harper, 2018). The rental fashion core value proposition is that it can provide consumers with a wide variety of choice at a reduced price, enabling access to variety (including designer luxury products), with minimal financial risk while offering potential for a more environmentally friendly offering (Gyde and McNeill, 2021). However, there has been little investigation into what could make renting

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fashion appealing, but given that younger consumers utilise social media to engage with fashion brands and retailers, this may be a way to encourage behavioural change.

Social Media and Generation-Z: As of January 2022, the global average penetration rate of social network usage is 58.4%, Facebook the market leader, has 2.89 billion monthly active users (Statista.com, March 2022). Instagram (another social media giant) is important for fashion brands due to the visual nature of fashion promotion (Lynch and Barnes, 2020). Generation-Z, the young, digital natives are important fashion consumers. Born from 1995 to 2010, these young people have been exposed to social media their entire lives (Francis and Hoefel, 2018) they spend nearly 11 hours consuming content, reading, liking and sharing across a variety of devices every day, checking Instagram up to 5 times per day (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021). This generation seek brand experiences and prefer the digital content of the social media influencer to traditional advertising (Lynch and Barnes, 2020) and Generation-Z are more conscious of environmental issues than previous generations (Hurrelmann and Albrecht, 2021; Ritch et al, 2021). Jacobson and Harrison (2021) report that due to the power of social media, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have become a vital part of marketing brand strategy as marketing communications seek to reach large communities of followers. The authors suggest that the Sustainable Fashion SMIs are content creators who have become popular discussing and sharing about sustainable fashion on social media. In a study of female consumers in India, the authors concluded that social media influencers had a positive effect on respondents' attitudes about fashion rental in the fashion industry and that more research is needed (Shivastrava et al, 2021). Therefore, this indicates that social media could play a role in influencing sustainable fashion practice and specifically rental fashion. There is little research that addresses sustainable fashion and social media influencers (Jacobson and Harrison, 2022) and even less addressing how Sustainable Fashion SMIs create fashion lifestyle content involving fashion rental services, and thus providing a rationale to study this area.

Research issue to be addressed: The aim of this research is to explore the fashion rental services industry as a potential contribution to the sustainability agenda, specifically focussing on the role of the SMI. Previous literature does identify that the SMI is very powerful with regards influence, however, there is very little literature exploring consumption behaviour of Sustainable Fashion Social Media Influencers and the area of fashion rental (out with occasion wear). Renting is also in its infancy in the UK (besides wedding wear, graduations etc).

The research questions informing the research were:

1. What and who are Sustainable Fashion Social Media Influencers?
2. How do Sustainable Fashion Social Media Influencers relate to their followers?
3. How do fashion rental services contribute to the circular economy?

4. What is the relationship with fashion rental organisations and Sustainable SMI's and how might this contribute to the environmental agenda of the fashion industry?

Methodology used: To better understand the potential of the fashion rental industry and specifically how the Sustainable Fashion SMIs communicate about it, an exploratory inductive interpretative approach was deemed appropriate.

This work-in-progress research, investigates Sustainable Fashion SMIs in the UK, their own fashion rental practice and behaviour, and their relationship with their Generation-Z followers. Five UK based, Sustainable Fashion SMIs were selected using a purposive, non-probability sampling procedure which is appropriate for a new exploratory study (Bryman and Bell, 2015) and in-depth interviews were completed in March and April 2022. The analysis of these first qualitative results will be presented at the conference.

Results achieved (conclusions) or expected as well as their relevance for theory and practice: The early findings indicate that Sustainable Fashion SMIs exhibit a high level of awareness of environmental issues in the fashion industry and are seeking to find new ways to address sustainable behaviours for themselves. Sustainable Fashion SMIs know they have power and influence and findings suggest that they believe they have influenced their followers to reduce consumption of new clothing and accessories but that fashion rental is still a new phenomenon, and that it will take time for followers to adopt. In saying that, the findings suggest that fashion rental is highly interesting to the SMIs themselves and their fast fashion Gen-Z followers. The findings will offer novel information for the rental service industry and new insights about the behaviour of these influential Sustainable Fashion SMIs and their large Generation-Z communities.

Keywords: fashion rental, sustainable fashion consumption influence.

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