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### **"That is a Huge Wardrobe and Clothing Mistake!": The Unethical Consumption Habits of YouTube's Fashion Influencers and the Environmental Consequences of a Disposable Lifestyle**

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“That is a Huge Wardrobe and Clothing Mistake!”: The Unethical Consumption Habits of  
YouTube’s Fashion Influencers and the Environmental Consequences of a Disposable Lifestyle

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“That is a Huge Wardrobe and Clothing Mistake!”: The Unethical Consumption Habits of YouTube’s Fashion Influencers and the Environmental Consequences of a Disposable Lifestyle

*ABSTRACT: People flock to YouTube for the latest videos from their favorite influencers, not realizing that the consumption habits of those influencers could lead to environmental disaster. This thesis builds upon the conversation about the need for sustainable messages on social media that target young, impressionable audiences. A detailed study of 15 videos from five fashion YouTubers reveals that: (1) fast fashion brands dominate across the platform; (2) fashion YouTubers fail to take responsibility for their unethical consumption habits; and (3) none of them successfully avoid unsustainable fashion choices, despite some efforts to do so. Meaningful solutions to the fast fashion crisis are lacking within YouTube’s fashion community, and there is a need for influencers to educate and encourage their viewers about the environmental cost of a disposable lifestyle before it is too late.*

## Introduction

It is difficult to believe that shopping for clothing could lead to something as catastrophic as climate change, but the overconsumption and mass disposal of fashion has become a serious environmental threat. Consumers are attracted to cheap fashion trends that fizzle out before they can wear an outfit a second time, and these outfits appear on social media as wardrobe and clothing mistakes – items that have gone out of style and become fashion waste. This toxic cycle can be observed across various media platforms, where influential figures encourage unethical consumption habits that consumers engage with every single day.

YouTube began as a small video sharing site in the early 2000s, and it has since become one of the most popular media platforms in the world, with almost two billion monthly active users (Lua). This has opened up an ever-increasing window of opportunities for normal, everyday people to achieve fame by creating their own videos to publish on the site. With the rapid influx of content creators becoming internet celebrities, the advertising industry had a new source of revenue. These “influencers” provided an outlet for more and more product placement and promotion within videos – videos that young people were attracted to because of the

authenticity and the connection that could be established with YouTubers. The creative outlet helped put content generation and social media influencing on the map as real career paths; however, YouTube has also opened doors for dangerous consumption habits and the promotion of products that pose major threats to environmental health.

An article from *The New York Times* claims that “teenagers and 20-somethings who have mastered these platforms... are going to dominate not just internet culture or the entertainment industry but society as a whole” (Roose). With so much power on social media platforms, these individuals have gained authority over consumers, influencing many of their life decisions. Influencers are more approachable than celebrities, and they craft a lifestyle that is both desirable and attainable – practically turning their lives into a commodity. One of the most important components of the influencer lifestyle is how they craft their identity through fashion. They create videos in which they sort through all of the new items they purchase, revamp their entire wardrobe, and consume massive amounts of clothing in an effort to reinvent themselves at the start of every new season. Many of the items they wear or promote are not ethically sourced and could be thrown out within the span of a year. These are all defining factors of fast fashion and an unethical lifestyle that has become a significant contributor to climate change.

Historically speaking, fast fashion has been around for a very brief moment in time, yet it has caused catastrophic damage to the planet and the people who inhabit it. An article from *Vox* describes the costs of fast fashion, saying that the speedy supply chains of these massive fashion brands “rely on outsourced and often underpaid labor from factory workers overseas. This process is also environmentally damaging and resource-intensive” (Nguyen). The website for *The True Cost*, a documentary that exposes the horrors of the fast fashion industry, lists some of

the shocking truths about contemporary fashion consumption. It states that “the world now consumes more than 80 billion new pieces of clothing every year. This is 400% more than we consumed just two decades ago” (*The True Cost*). This is a dramatic shift in the way people consume clothing, and it is happening so quickly that even the environment is unable to keep up. Once this cheaply-manufactured clothing loses its allure, it is sent to landfills, where it takes decades for the materials to break down (*The True Cost*). The way consumers view fashion has also undergone a massive shift. People are constantly disposing of old items and demanding more within a very short span of time. One of the most unsettling facts is that even when consumers learn about the effects of their shopping habits, they will often continue to ignore the problem. A 2018 report showed that “most consumers have a selective memory when it comes to buying from exploitative companies.... People tend to prioritize ease of purchase and price of an item over sustainability” (Nguyen). The issue of fast fashion is often underrepresented or completely ignored, and influencers are a powerful force behind that threat.

With the popularity of YouTube and fashion influencers increasing every year, and with a fast fashion industry that does not seem to be slowing down any time soon, I would like to raise awareness about the issue and contribute my research to the conversation in order to promote a more sustainable lifestyle. I am not a perfect consumer – there have been many times when the most convenient and affordable option was to buy from a fast fashion brand. However, when I started educating myself about the issue and looking at what my consumption habits are really doing to the environment, I became more conscious of what I was consuming and questioned how much meaning each item would bring into my life. This research is important because it helps identify the ways in which YouTube’s fashion influencers are encouraging, or potentially discouraging, a disposable lifestyle and consumption of cheap goods, and it also raises awareness

for the issues this lifestyle has caused and will continue to cause. It points to the themes that arise in these videos and gives the framework needed for people to be more mindful consumers.

Viewers, and YouTubers themselves, will be able to see what messages and images need to be changed in order to promote more sustainable fashion and lifestyle choices. It is necessary to uncover the ways in which fast fashion is addressed on social media channels, and then awaken people to a better understanding of the damage it is doing to the health of the planet.

## Literature Review

Fast fashion has become an increasingly popular and affordable way for consumers to keep up with trends and transform their wardrobes with the arrival of every new season. Scholars Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan define fast fashion as “low-cost clothing collections that mimic current luxury fashion trends” (273). They emphasize that fast fashion trends are very quick to run their course, with new styles being introduced every day, sending old clothing to the trash bin (Joy *et al.* 273). The fast-paced production and consumption of fashion has also caused a rapid decrease in environmental health, and in their research on the environmental injustice of fast fashion, scholars Bick, Halsey, and Ekenga illustrate the contradictory feelings surrounding this global issue. They understand that fast fashion provides consumers with the opportunity to buy more clothing for a cheaper price, but “increased consumption patterns have also created millions of tons of textile waste in landfills and unregulated settings” (Bick *et al.* 1). Both studies acknowledge the desire among consumers to reinvent themselves through fashion, as well as their lack of environmental concern when it comes to the clothing they buy. Joy, Sherry, Venkatesh, Wang, and Chan interviewed male and female fast fashion consumers in Hong Kong and Canada – two places where fast fashion dominates youth culture – about what fast fashion and sustainability meant to them (277). They found that consumers show concern for their

environmental impact outside of fast fashion, but “exhibited relatively little guilt about fast fashion’s disposability” (Joy *et al.* 280). This points to a failure among consumers, and the media they consume, to treat fast fashion as a serious harm to environmental health. They view fashion and sustainability as two separate entities when, in fact, they must go hand-in-hand. Bick, Halsey, and Ekenga prove that there is an environmental cost of fast fashion and that it is not worth endless access to cheaply manufactured clothing. They break down several issues that are a direct result of the fast fashion industry, including the environmental hazards during production, occupational hazards during production, and textile waste (Bick *et al.* 2). My primary concern is textile waste and the ways in which it is destroying the health of the planet – a consequence that fashion influencers might ignore or be entirely unaware of. None of these scholars elaborate much on the important role of consumers in shaping attitudes towards sustainability, or how consumers’ views of fast fashion are constructed. I dive deeper into that issue, analyzing the content that modern consumers view every day and how it plays a significant role in their sustainable, or unsustainable, habits. Are meaningful solutions to the fast fashion crisis – like transitioning to sustainably sourced clothing – frequently talked about on social media platforms, or are they being glossed over in favor of the allure of an ever-changing wardrobe and easily-accessible trends?

In order to uncover the ways in which consumers interact with social media platforms, scholars have researched and identified several stages of influence mechanisms. In their research, Ki and Kim define four connected to Instagram: influence attempts, consumers’ response to what is being sold or advertised, the target’s desire to mimic, and how that desire is reflected in their actions. Ki and Kim distributed a questionnaire to United States citizens between the ages of 18 and 49 years in order to identify these aspects. Each participant named one of his or her favorite

social media influencers on Instagram, and this name was embedded throughout the rest of the survey (Ki and Kim 911). The questions measured the extent to which each respondent believed that: (a) the influencer's Instagram content was visually attractive and informative; (b) the influencer demonstrated taste and opinion leadership; and (c) s/he wished to mimic the influencer by purchasing the items endorsed or posted (Ki and Kim 911). Ki and Kim's in-depth analysis confirms five aspects of posts from influencers that "affect consumers' attitudes positively and significantly" (905). If a post is attractive, prestigious, expert, informative, or interactive, then consumers will be positively influenced by the content and will attempt to mimic the behaviors through social word-of-mouth or purchases (Ki and Kim 915). This argument is relevant because it provides groundwork for determining if the content that influencers are creating is actually making consumers want to copy their behavior, and it identifies the components needed for an Instagram post to have significant influence. The findings serve as a guide for my research because they provide a theory that can be tested on other social platforms, like YouTube. Looking for these types of messages in YouTube videos is a good indicator of whether or not a video might spark consumers' desire to mimic.

The desire to mimic is not solely based on the outward components of posts. Researchers have looked into the messages portrayed by YouTubers that promote intimacy between influencers and fans, which also impacts fans' desire to consume. Scholars observe the ways in which one particular influencer can sway fan behaviors by establishing an aura of authenticity and giving fans an intimate look into their life. Berryman and Kavka find that YouTubers like Zoe "Zoella" Sugg take on a "big sister" persona that makes fans more likely to take advice and connect commodities with the positive feelings provided by that persona. They argue that YouTubers integrate their interests, like fashion and beauty, into videos of their daily lives,



which gives audiences an intimate attachment to the products used to achieve that lifestyle (Berryman and Kavka 318). This research implies that viewers go beyond merely mimicking behavior – they also establish an emotional connection to products that are used by an influencer they admire. Studies have answered the question of why these influencers gain celebrity status and the strategies applied to successfully capture audiences, but the question still remains of how those strategies can have negative outcomes. The research also shows that influencers have the power to spark a desire for sustainable products, or to simply discourage the lifestyle of constant consumption as a whole, in order to promote sustainable habits from their viewers. I question whether or not influencers are ignoring larger problems in their promotion of fast fashion and if that has left consumers in the dark about the global impact of their disposable behaviors.

Age is another important factor when considering whether or not people are influenced by the media they consume. Johnstone and Lindh investigate the relationship between age and sustainability awareness of consumers and how influencers play a role in raising that awareness (e127). Millennials (people born between 1980 and the mid-1990s) are the central focus of their study because they are an impressionable group who are consciously and unconsciously affected by the power of influencers who have “the potential to promote ethical consumption and behaviour over value” (Johnstone and Lindh e128). It is important to note that the audience for the YouTube videos within my study are likely members of Gen Z (people born after 1996), so they might have even stronger views about the importance of sustainability and demonstrate a passionate desire for change. Johnstone and Lindh received 788 responses from people in 59 different countries that tested their hypotheses: “influencers proliferate sustainability awareness among younger consumers; the younger the consumer, the stronger the importance of the influencer; and the older the consumer, the higher the sustainability awareness” (e130-e131).

They found that all of their hypotheses were supported by their research, which reveals that it is important for influencers to promote ethical consumption habits among the younger generations who view their content, which will lead to greater sustainability awareness later in their lives. In a similar study, Bedard and Tolmie explore the role of social media in millennials' green consumption behavior and if it increases the likelihood of green purchases among their generation (1388). Through their study, Bedard and Tolmie discovered that social media usage leads to higher green purchase intentions among millennials, and consumers who frequently engage with content are more likely to purchase sustainable products (1392-1393). All of these scholars uncover an important factor that younger generations, like millennials or Gen Z, have a heightened awareness and concern for making green purchases. However, it seems that there must be a pre-existing desire among these consumers to follow and interact with green brands and influencers. Although both studies provide important data, they do not look at the power of a particular social media platform and the sustainable, or unsustainable, messages that are promoted by its influencers. YouTube is a place where so many young people consume content on a daily basis, and where they can express their desire to mimic the lifestyles of the influencers they admire. Therefore, it is important to study the consumption habits being promoted, especially regarding fast fashion, and whether or not YouTubers are doing anything to shape viewers' feelings about sustainability in a positive way.

Scholars have focused specifically on fast fashion and awareness of the issue among consumers, studying their attitudes toward making sustainable fashion choices. McNeill and Moore apply the developmental theory model to help them identify the various stages of environmental concern that have emerged with the introduction of fast fashion. They discovered that, with growing awareness of the fast fashion conundrum, consumers can be categorized into

three groups: “‘self’ consumers, concerned with hedonistic needs, ‘social’ consumers, concerned with social image, and ‘sacrifice’ consumers who strive to reduce their impact on the world” (McNeill and Moore 212). They conclude that, although awareness of the environmental impact of fast fashion is rising in the fashion industry, many consumers are hesitant to support this transition to sustainability because there are so many “barriers.” Fashion becomes part of consumers’ identities, and therefore wardrobes are always changing and needing to be replenished in order for people to feel like they belong. Though there are “sacrifice” consumers in the world, they must willingly take the time to educate themselves on the subject and learn about how they can decrease their harmful impact on the environment. Additionally, these people are marketed to by sustainable brands or influencers, which is still promoting the desire to consume. The question remains if YouTubers are encouraging viewers to take on a certain consumption identity. What must be done in order for more consumers to begin questioning their fashion choices, especially if they are constantly seeing images of influencers treating clothing as something that is disposable and something that can be replaced by other cheap goods? McNeill and Moore’s study provides information for marketers of sustainable fashion brands about the types of consumers that exist, but I am trying to understand what it could mean for the environment if consumers are being persuaded into buying fast fashion. I explore whether or not YouTubers play a role in viewers’ reluctance to give up fast fashion, and if they show any signs of encouraging sustainable lifestyle choices.

I have woven these research topics into one thesis that asks: Are YouTube’s fashion influencers encouraging a disposable lifestyle through unethical consumption habits, and do they demonstrate consciousness of the negative impacts of those habits? Based on the results of my

analysis, I reveal how the most prevalent consumption habits could impact consumer behavior and the health of the environment.

## Method

In order to answer my research question, I selected five of YouTube's top fashion influencers who still actively use the platform. I chose a sample of five YouTubers because it provided a manageable amount of content, while still being large enough to show the types of lifestyles that are being promoted across the platform. The YouTubers I selected are Zoe "Zoella" Sugg, with 4.81 million subscribers on her new channel and 11.1 million on her original channel; Ashley a.k.a. BestDressed, with 3.71 million subscribers; Patricia Bright, with 2.9 million subscribers; Tess Christine, with 2.37 million subscribers; and Samantha "Sammi" Maria, with 1.76 million subscribers<sup>1</sup>. All of these YouTubers, except Ashley, are featured on a list of the top 100 fashion YouTubers from *Feedspot* (Agarwal "100 Fashion Youtubers"). I chose Ashley over other YouTubers from that list because she has one of the highest subscriber counts, and she has a huge influence within the online fashion community.

I then selected three of the most recent fashion-related videos from each of these channels. Three videos was the safest number if I wanted to use their most recent content. I classified the fashion videos by their titles. If the title mentioned a clothing haul, outfit ideas, unboxing, a shopping trip, another person picking outfits for the YouTuber, mending or "flipping" clothes, cleaning out their closets, fashion mistakes, etc., then I counted it as a fashion video that would be significant to my study.

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<sup>1</sup> Since Ashley's last name is unknown, throughout my thesis I refer to all of these YouTubers as their fans do. Zoella is Zoe, BestDressed is Ashley, Patricia Bright is Patricia, Tess Christine is Tess, and Samantha Maria is Sammi. In-text citations use last names or usernames.

I took an inductive approach when studying these videos in order to see which patterns arose. I studied the videos for a variety of verbal and visual cues that revealed the overarching lifestyle choices being encouraged by my selected influencers. The cues fell into one of four categories: ethical behavior (verbal), ethical behavior (visual), unethical behavior (verbal), and unethical behavior (visual). I then narrowed down the most prominent behaviors based on their frequency (how often they showed up across all videos) and the number of videos they showed up in. These results can be found in table 1. It is important to note that I followed a list of 30 fast fashion brands from *The Pretty Planeteer* (“30+ Fast Fashion Brands To Avoid”) while conducting my analysis, as well as a list of 35 ethical and sustainable fashion brands from *The Good Trade* (“35 Ethical & Sustainable Clothing Brands”). Other brands were mentioned in the videos, but I did not count them if they were not included in these lists. While watching the videos, I took note of the various behaviors I could identify and listed them under one of the four categories. By the end of this study, it was quite clear how frequently these behaviors showed up, which behaviors were the most frequent, and if the overall messages were ethical or unethical.

## Analysis

YouTube’s fashion community is incredibly large and diverse in its content. Although the primary texts of this study are videos from the top fashion YouTubers, none of the content is exactly the same. Some videos, like clothing hauls, are longer and more drawn out because the YouTuber will describe each item they bought, where it comes from, and then try everything on for viewers to see how it all fits. Some videos are under five minutes – a quick look at how to style different outfits or new trends that are emerging in the fashion world. Most of the videos are between 10 and 15 minutes with a central theme: outfits of the week, sorting through clothing, showing off new pieces, explaining past fashion mistakes, etc. They can be laid back,

complex, in the style of a vlog, or extremely edited. There is not much of a limit on how these YouTubers structure their fashion videos, but despite the wide range of content, similar themes emerge in each video that allow for a larger discussion of the values these influencers are encouraging. The themes that emerged from my research can be found in table 1.

Table 1

Most Prominent Behaviors Found Within Videos From YouTube’s Top Fashion Influencers.

Ethical Behaviors (verbal)	Ethical Behaviors (visual)	Unethical Behaviors (verbal)	Unethical Behaviors (visual)
Praising pieces of clothing that have been carefully selected, thrifted, or are made out of sustainable materials <b>Frequency: 18</b> <b># of videos: 7</b>	Smiling and looking incredibly happy with thrifted clothing they purchased and strutting around/showing confidence <b>Frequency: 18</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>	Mentioning that clothing comes from a well-known fast fashion brand <b>Frequency: 30</b> <b># of videos: 8</b>	Showing an item they purchased that is almost identical to another item they already own <b>Frequency: 12</b> <b># of videos: 6</b>
Encouraging viewers to purchase clothing that they love and will get a lot of wear out of <b>Frequency: 7</b> <b># of videos: 4</b>	Title of the video states that the clothing is thrifted <b>Frequency: 3</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>	Saying they bought something, but they’re unsure if they can actually “pull it off” or they’re not even comfortable wearing it / buying things with no real purpose and making impulsive decisions (retail therapy) <b>Frequency: 13</b> <b># of videos: 7</b>	Title of the video mentions a haul of new clothing items bought for a new season, fashion mistakes, etc. <b>Frequency: 5</b> <b># of videos: 4</b>
Explaining how to style thrifted pieces of clothing and how they can be trendy <b>Frequency: 8</b> <b># of videos: 2</b>	Showing how to style the same clothing items in a variety of different ways	Saying they want to own, or do own, multiple versions of the same piece of clothing <b>Frequency: 15</b> <b># of videos: 7</b>	Holding clothing from a fast fashion brand close to show that they adore the brand <b>Frequency: 8</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>

	<b>Throughout an entire video from BestDressed</b>		
Learning from their mistakes and owning up to them (admitting that an unethical behavior was wrong) <b>Frequency: 5</b> <b># of videos: 2</b>	Listing (on the screen) that pieces of clothing are thrifted or sustainably made <b>Frequency: 9</b> <b># of videos: 1</b>	Expressing a deep love and being an enthusiastic supporter of a fast fashion brand <b>Frequency: 18</b> <b># of videos: 6</b>	Looking confident and showing off how good clothing from a fast fashion brand looks <b>Frequency: (entire video from Samantha Maria) + 8 more</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>
Narrating the steps they take when making their own clothing: the difficulties, the important things to remember, etc. <b>Frequency: 5</b> <b># of videos: 1</b>	Writing out various steps so viewers can learn how to make their own clothing + doing it in a visually appealing and quirky way <b>Frequency: 6</b> <b># of videos: 1</b>	Expressing some disappointment in something that was purchased from a fast fashion brand, saying they regret a purchase, or using the words “waste,” “junk,” or “mistake” to describe the clothing they’re sick of <b>Frequency: 20</b> <b># of videos: 4</b>	Showing disappointment in something that was purchased from a fast fashion brand (sad, disgusted look on their face) <b>Frequency: 4</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>
Saying they have a promo code so viewers can shop from the same thrift company AND explaining how affordable thrifting is <b>Frequency: 9</b> <b># of videos: 1</b>	Adding a note to the screen that explains how much money they saved while thrifting + giving a discount code <b>Frequency: 8</b> <b># of videos: 1</b>	Saying that products are linked below so viewers can directly buy from the fast fashion brand <b>Frequency: 5</b> <b># of videos: 4</b>	Being surrounded by piles of boxes full of clothing they ordered <b>Frequency: 3</b> <b># of videos: 3</b>

## Fast Fashion Brands Dominate Across the Platform

In the videos I studied, it seems as though fashion YouTubers are not opposed to shopping secondhand or buying sustainably sourced clothing. However, thrifted or ethically made items appear less frequently than the fast fashion brands that are mentioned or worn. In a

sample of 15 videos, nine of them show YouTubers promoting fast fashion brands, and the brands are named or listed more than 40 times. In comparison, sustainably-sourced clothing is mentioned in seven videos and thrifted pieces are named or listed fewer than 30 times. Ethical behaviors, overall, show up in fewer videos. One YouTuber who consistently features ethically-sourced clothing in her videos is Ashley, or BestDressed. She styles thrifted clothing and encourages re-wearing items in a variety of ways. She also makes clothing from scratch, and one of her videos chronicles her journey of crafting a handmade dress. In her video, “sewing a dress from scratch \*project runway i’m ready\*,” Ashley documents all of the steps that go into making her own clothing. The video is visually stunning and closely edited, and the final dress likely motivates viewers to create their own clothing and own something that is entirely one-of-a-kind. Ashley films every step of the process – from shopping for fabric to adding the final strands of ribbon. She adds text to the screen to provide viewers with basic instructions, and then she layers everything with music and a Super 8 filter that creates a feeling of nostalgia. Ashley puts in a lot of effort to inspire her audience with a more sustainable, low-waste, creative form of consumption. Ashley is candid with her viewers and shows the hardships along with the successes of her sewing journey. After an entire day of working on the dress, Ashley says, “one invisible zipper and a slight mental breakdown later, my dress was looking like a bad Statue of Liberty costume” (“sewing a dress from scratch”). This may be cause for concern because the process seems long and grueling, but Ashley ends the video with a beautiful compilation of her modeling the dress. She creates a balance between moments of distress and moments of satisfaction, and by the end of the video she shows positive growth and pride in her work. Ashley finds unique ways to test sustainable fashion trends and make them part of her everyday lifestyle, and she does it in an authentic, appealing way. She sets a good example of how fashion



YouTubers could begin incorporating ethical consumption habits into their videos.

Unfortunately, she is the only one who places so much focus on sustainability.

The frequency of fast fashion brands mentioned throughout these videos is not the only concerning behavior. Fashion YouTubers also express a deep love for the items they purchased from those brands, holding the clothing close to them and appearing genuinely happy with their purchases. While it could be argued that loving an item is an ethical behavior, if the clothing comes from a fast fashion brand, then there is a high chance that it will rapidly decrease in quality and eventually end up in the back of consumers' closets. Samantha "Sammi" Maria is an enthusiastic supporter of fast fashion brands. Two of her videos from my sample focus on the fast fashion brands Missguided and ASOS and the pieces she loves from each one. In her video "WHAT I WOULD BE WEARING | LOOKBOOK #ad," Sammi shows off the different ways that viewers can style items from Missguided, an unsustainable brand, and she does it in a very persuasive way. She poses confidently, talks about how much fun it was to put the outfits together, discusses new trends, and says that she hopes viewers will be inspired by her choices (Maria "WHAT I WOULD BE WEARING"). One possible reason why Sammi put so much effort into crafting this video is because it is sponsored by a fast fashion brand. If Missguided sent her free merchandise or paid her to promote their brand, then she was likely more motivated to make content that is highly attractive and engaging. Her videos illustrate some of the aspects of posts that Ki and Kim discuss in their research. Sammi crafts an appealing video in which upbeat music plays over different clips of her modeling the clothing, and it conveys her expertise in the world of fashion. These behaviors distract from the fact that she is promoting an unsustainable brand. Her unethical consumption habits are glossed over by the high quality of the video and how good the clothing looks on her, which might inspire viewers to mimic her

style. While YouTubers like Ashley are styling thrifted items, most YouTubers are like Sammi, styling clothing that is not sustainably made or ethically sourced. This makes unethical consumption habits more accessible to viewers who lack knowledge of sustainable fashion, or those who do not care about it in the first place. However, it does not take into consideration the viewers who have taken the time to be more mindful consumers of fashion YouTube and critique the lifestyle choices being made in these videos. Not all viewers are mindless consumers of the media, but influencers still have a responsibility to inspire a more sustainable lifestyle among the viewers who do not understand the complex and problematic world of fast fashion.

Zoe “Zoella” Sugg does not shy away from promoting fast fashion brands, either. In her videos “Autumn/Winter Clothing Haul & Try On” and “Shopping For Spring | Clothing & Storage,” she takes a more laid back approach to sorting through the different fast fashion items she has purchased, and she spends a lot of time describing each piece and trying them on. Zoe is the most popular fashion influencer on YouTube, so it is immediately concerning that she primarily shops from fast fashion brands and buys massive amounts of new clothing each time. In both videos, Zoe sits down with boxes full of items that she has just ordered, which also brings in concern for the environmental cost of shipping and how frequently she is ordering clothing online. She sits on the floor of a room in her house and sorts through clothing from some of the most prominent fast fashion brands: Zara, H&M, Mango, ASOS, and Missguided. As she sorts through each item, she has a mix of positive and negative reactions, showing that she might have acted impulsively while shopping online, or that her style has already shifted in the time it took for the clothing to be delivered. While admiring a jumper that she got from Zara, Zoe says, “when I tell you this is the softest thing I’ve ever felt, I really mean it” (Sugg “Autumn/Winter Clothing Haul”). Then, while opening a dress from ASOS in another video she

says, “oh no, I think I hate this. Why did I get it?” (Sugg “Shopping For Spring”). Not only is fast fashion the central focus of Zoe’s videos, but her reactions reveal that she purchased these items impulsively without considering the consequences of shopping on a whim. While these fashion “mistakes” could translate as a lesson for some viewers, Zoe does not critique the brands enough for her disappointment to be influential. Though she shows her dislike for the dress, she also says that she is willing to try it on and that it looked good on the model (Sugg “Shopping For Spring”). If she is short in her critiques, but generous in her praise, then it is possible that there is no intention on her part to stop buying from fast fashion brands. Though there are YouTubers making strides towards a more sustainable future of fashion, it appears that the majority of YouTubers are still supporting fast fashion brands, and viewers could be inspired to move in the same direction.

## Fashion YouTubers Fail to Take Responsibility for Their Unethical Consumption Habits

The fashion YouTubers within this study also fail to acknowledge the impact that fast fashion and overconsumption can have on the health of the environment, suggesting that they might lack knowledge of how unethical their consumption habits are. Some of the most frequently occurring verbal and visual unethical consumption habits within these videos reveal a lack of understanding from YouTubers about the impact their behaviors have on their viewers and the environment. If an average viewer with little sustainability awareness watches one of these videos, they will gain almost no insight about how to consciously consume clothes or get rid of old clothing in a sustainable way. Three of the most unethical, disposable behaviors that emerged in my study are: owning multiple versions of the same item, using negative language

when describing clothing, and impulsive, careless consumption of fashion. Zoe's videos are the most problematic when it comes to owning items that look exactly alike. She exemplifies the issue in her video, "Autumn/Winter Clothing Haul & Try On," in which she shows viewers new clothing that she ordered as "retail therapy." As she sorts through what she ordered from fast fashion brands, she shows two jackets that she wanted for walking her dog, three versions of the same hat in different colors, and five different tracksuits and loungewear sets (Sugg "Autumn/Winter Clothing Haul"). In her video, "Shopping For Spring | Clothing & Storage," Zoe buys so many bikinis that she has to save trying them on for another video. She says, "I got a load of bikinis.... I want to do a proper try on of all of those and see what I'm loving, what I'm not loving, because I bought a lot" (Sugg "Shopping For Spring"). Zoe does mention that she plans to return any bikinis that she does not like, which could make viewers believe that she is being responsible with her purchases. However, returning items via mail comes with a serious environmental cost, and most returned items never end up back on the shelves of stores. An article from *BBC Earth* notes that "five billion pounds of waste is generated through returns each year, contributing 15 million metric tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere" (Constable "Your brand new returns"). All of these factors show that Zoe is unaware of the unethical behaviors she is promoting in her videos. Shopping for multiple versions of the same product, especially one that is unsustainable and cheaply manufactured, is a toxic behavior for her viewers to witness. As the most watched fashion YouTuber, she has a lot of influence over fans, especially those who have built an intimate connection with her over the years. If she continues to consume without acknowledging the cost of her actions, then viewers might find nothing wrong with her disposable lifestyle choices.

By purchasing massive amounts of clothing at a time, including many pieces that look alike, Zoe also falls victim to impulse buying and regretting her purchases. She shows her disappointment in both visual and verbal ways, throwing items to the side, saying she hates them, hardly remembering when and why she purchased them, and making jokes about how bad things look when she opens them. In her video, “Shopping For Spring | Clothing & Storage,” Zoe buys three versions of the same hat from Zara, a prominent fast fashion brand. She spends more than a minute of the video expressing her disappointment with the hats because they are too large for her head. She says, “I just don’t think this suits me. I bought three of them, in different colors” with a look of regret and disappointment on her face (Sugg “Shopping For Spring”). She then proceeds to gently throw one of the hats across the room as though it is a complete waste. Not only does Zoe purchase three identical items that she does not need, but she also acts like they can be easily disposed of when they are not exactly what she wanted. Though it is good that Zoe includes her critical opinion of fast fashion items, she never goes into much detail about the larger issues. When her hats disappoint her, she tosses them to the side and goes on with life as usual, without explaining why it is wrong to impulsively buy items, especially from fast fashion brands. She does not acknowledge any consequences beyond her own disappointment that the clothing does not look as good as she hoped. Zoe does not seem to learn her lesson from these experiences because she continues to buy into the fast fashion industry. By the end of the video, she has forgotten about the hats and is praising other clothing from fast fashion brands. There are no messages about ethical consumption habits or how to invest in quality clothing that sparks joy. Instead, Zoe continues to mindlessly consume clothing that she eventually regrets buying.

Patricia Bright also fails to acknowledge the environmental cost of her consumption habits, and she refers to her old clothing as “waste,” “junk,” and “mistake” nearly ten times in

her video, “WORST Fashion MISTAKES AND Trends I’ve recently BOUGHT - Zara, Lily Silk, ASOS, PRADA.” Talking about clothing in this way frames it as something that can be disposed of any time a consumer gets sick of it or wants to reinvent their wardrobe. Patricia has 18 bags filled with clothing that she views as waste, and that illustrates her lack of awareness for the harm that clothing does to the environment, especially when it is thrown away. At the very beginning of the video she says, “now that I’ve got rid of all the junk, I feel like it’s going to be easier to style what I have” (Bright “WORST Fashion MISTAKES”). Even the title of the video is problematic because Patricia emphasizes – with words written in all caps – that she will be going through purchases that she considers to be her worst mistakes, as well as showing new items that she bought in order to conform to contemporary trends. As a result, it becomes a form of entertainment for viewers to see their favorite YouTubers make disposable lifestyle choices, which increases the demand for similar videos across the platform. If Patricia had more knowledge of the sustainability impact of her purchases, she might have avoided terms like “junk” or “waste” that promote an unethical cycle of purchasing clothing and disposing of it as soon as it loses its allure. Patricia continues this concerning behavior in her video “BEYONCE HOW COULD YOU? I HAD TO DO IT GUYS... I BOUGHT THE IVY PARK x ADIDAS COLLECTION (for you!).” There are several unethical behaviors throughout the video that illustrate Patricia’s disregard for sustainability. Though it is not an issue connected to environmental health, one of the biggest controversies in the fast fashion industry is the way garment workers are treated. When trying on a tracksuit, Patricia says, “whether [Beyoncé] made it or her handmaidens made it – I don’t care, I love it” (“BEYONCE HOW COULD YOU?”). It is doubtful that Patricia meant any harm with this comment, but it emphasizes her lack of knowledge or concern for how her clothing is made. As long as it looks good on her, she does

not question how ethical the working conditions are for garment workers. To a viewer who does not have an extensive knowledge of the fast fashion industry, Patricia's blasé attitude might even be entertaining or funny, which adds to the appeal of the video and viewers' interest in her unethical behaviors. As mentioned in the title of the video, Patricia buys this clothing so her viewers can get an idea of its quality; however, she mindlessly consumes most of the collection, knowing that she might not like any of it, which encourages impulsive purchases and overconsumption of unnecessary items. She has a wasteful mindset when it comes to fashion consumption, and while she thinks she is doing a service for her fans, she is also doing a great disservice to environmental health. Other research has shown that influencers have a significant impact on the sustainability awareness of the younger generations who watch their content (Johnstone and Lindh). If the content that fans are consuming primarily promotes a disposable lifestyle, then there is a greater risk that they will not consider fashion as a major contributor to environmental health.

## No Fashion YouTuber Successfully Avoids Unsustainable Fashion Choices

Some of the videos from my study do incorporate ethical messages or sustainable lifestyle choices, but none of them successfully avoid fast fashion, disposable behaviors, and overconsumption. Even the most sustainable, environmentally conscious fashion YouTubers – like Ashley – have their own unethical consumption habits. In her video “here are some things I thrifted in nyc :),” viewers can see the floors of Ashley's studio apartment covered in clothing, and she admits that she has a “large and ever-growing colony of thrifted clothes laying on [her] floor” (BestDressed). Although these items are thrifted, it is not ethical to consume an

unnecessary amount of clothing that might never be worn, and overconsumption is a disposable way of living no matter what is being purchased. A trip to the thrift store is a positive step, but it is not the solution. If there is no reason to wear or own something, but YouTubers buy it, then it suggests to viewers that they could do the same. In her video “30 FALL OUTFIT IDEAS,” Ashley demonstrates a similar mix of sustainable and unsustainable fashion choices. For the entirety of the video, she shows viewers how they can style a few select pieces of clothing in a variety of ways. She seems to be following minimalist ideals by getting a lot of use out of a few items from her closet. The video also lists where all of her clothing comes from, and she styles a total of nine thrifted items. However, the thrifted clothing is again outnumbered by fast fashion brands. Ashley styles a total of 13 items from fast fashion brands like Urban Outfitters, Zara, and Nasty Gal. Despite making more ethical consumption choices than every other YouTuber in my study, Ashley falls short when it comes to committing herself entirely to the lifestyle.

Patricia Bright illustrates a similar paradox – she acknowledges her fashion mistakes and why it is bad to consume impulsively, yet she continues to restock her wardrobe, dispose of clothing, and buy from fast fashion brands. Within the first minute of her video “BEYONCÉ WHAT HAVE YOU DONE NOW? The new ICY/IVY PARK X ADIDAS was not what I expected...” she says, “I didn’t get everything – I got just what I would wear” (Bright). She does not buy items just for the sake of the video – she orders what she genuinely likes – showing that she learned a lesson from her first video about Beyoncé’s collection. Patricia vocalizes her choice to purchase quality clothing that she will get a lot of wear out of, and that is a positive message to share with viewers. At the end of her video “WORST Fashion MISTAKES AND Trends I’ve recently BOUGHT - Zara, Lily Silk, ASOS, PRADA,” Patricia takes a moment to reflect on the lessons she has learned from past fashion mistakes. She tells viewers to think



carefully and ask themselves, “is this going to work on me?” before purchasing items that look good on a celebrity or influencer they admire (Bright “WORST Fashion MISTAKES”). This is a valuable lesson to share with viewers, especially after she has just modeled a bunch of items that they might be influenced into buying. Taking a moment to discourage viewers from unethical consumption habits is a step in the right direction, but there are instances within this video in which Patricia’s actions do not align with her words. The video begins with clips of Patricia cleaning 18 bags worth of clothing that she no longer likes out of her closet, some of which has never been worn (Bright “WORST Fashion MISTAKES”). Though it is likely that she did not throw all of this clothing away, she never mentions what she will do with it, which leaves the question of whether or not she got rid of it in a sustainable way. She then tries on some new pieces of clothing that she wants to add to her wardrobe. This behavior is concerning because she treats all of her past clothing as though it is something disposable, tosses it all out of her closet, gets into a mode of wanting to reinvent herself and her style, and then buys new outfits to add to her already large wardrobe (Bright “WORST Fashion MISTAKES”). She promotes the lifestyle that keeps the fast fashion industry running by disposing of clothing and buying more as a way of reinventing herself. Although she is aware of the mistakes she has made in the past, it is hard to believe that she will not end up regretting these purchases and purging her closet again. Her unethical consumption habits show that there is still a lot of progress that needs to be made in order for consumers of fashion YouTube videos to be exposed to entirely sustainable lifestyle choices.

Tess Christine also offers a glimmer of hope as the only other YouTuber in this study who features thrifted clothing in their videos. She has an incredibly charismatic energy that comes through in everything she does, and it makes her videos lighthearted and enjoyable to

watch. In her video “OOTW: Casual Everyday Outfits | baby bump friendly!” Tess describes everything she wears throughout the week and where it all comes from. In a sequence of seven days, only two thrifted items are mentioned, and both are boots. The majority of the video is spent listing items from fast fashion brands like Urban Outfitters, ASOS, H&M, and Zara. The brands are named more than 10 times throughout the video, and she wears at least one fast fashion item every day (Christine “OOTW: Casual Everyday Outfits”). Though Tess owns sustainably sourced clothing, it seems as though the bulk of her wardrobe comes from fast fashion brands. Contrastingly, her video, “VLOG: thrift haul, the met, apt. décor & nursery updates!” is sponsored by a popular online thrifting site called ThredUp. Tess spends several minutes of the video sorting through all of the pieces she ordered from ThredUp and explaining how viewers can style secondhand clothing. She is generous in her praise of how affordable the clothing is, and she even lists a promo code that viewers can use, which gives them the opportunity to adopt more ethical consumption habits. Though being sponsored by an online thrift store is an important message for viewers to engage with, Tess explains that she loves ThredUp because “they have some of your favorite brands – yours and mine – like Urban Outfitters, Zara, Free People, and so many more” (Christine “VLOG: thrift haul”). Tess contradicts her praise for sustainable fashion by claiming that all of her favorite clothing comes from some of the most unsustainable brands, which builds upon the consistent theme that YouTube’s fashion influencers are not able to commit themselves to sustainable lifestyle choices. Although she is encouraging her viewers to shop secondhand, she still gives praise to major fast fashion brands, which will not deter viewers from purchasing items directly from those brands. Fashion YouTubers are, of course, making important progress and showing an effort to adopt sustainable habits; however, the frequency of unethical behaviors within their

videos often outweighs the frequency of ethical behaviors (see table 1). This pattern must be reversed in order for viewers to pick up on the urgency of the fast fashion crisis and the need for stronger ethical consumption habits.

## Conclusion

Despite some efforts to encourage sustainable lifestyle choices, the majority of YouTube's top fashion influencers display unethical consumption habits that contribute to fashion waste and declining environmental health. The dominant behaviors within the selected videos give rise to three central claims: items from fast fashion brands are more valued than sustainably sourced clothing, fashion YouTubers lack a crucial understanding of their environmental footprint, and there is not a single fashion YouTuber who is able to avoid unethical consumption habits. These claims reveal a need for a deeper, more widespread understanding of fast fashion among consumers, and YouTubers themselves.

This research builds upon conclusions made by other scholars, and it offers a unique look at the ways in which media can serve as more than a source of entertainment – it can guide consumers' identities and shape the value they place upon sustainability. The importance of sustainable fashion is noticeably lacking in contemporary media. People from all around the world claim to take interest in saving the environment, yet many of those consumers show very little guilt about purchasing and disposing of fast fashion products (Joy *et al.* 280). These people fit the role of “self” consumers who are concerned only with personal wants and a desire to always own more (McNeill and Moore 217). Based on my findings, one of the primary reasons for consumers' “selfishness” is their lack of exposure to ethical fashion choices. While progress has been made in terms of promoting sustainable fashion and minimalist ideals, there is still a long way to go before consumers are inspired to shift their lifestyles in a significant way. With

very few fashion YouTubers sacrificing their trendy outfits and shopping sprees, consumers are less likely to grasp the true importance of sustainable fashion or understand the consequences of living a disposable lifestyle. YouTubers must educate themselves and their viewers in a way that will help them transition from “self” to “sacrifice” consumers. This shift could drastically cut back on the amount of clothing that ends up in landfills and improve environmental health overall.

This study reveals important distinctions between ethical and unethical consumption behaviors, but there are some gaps in the research that could make the claims stronger. I only studied videos from five YouTubers, but there are hundreds of fashion influencers on the platform that similar research could be applied to. Despite the fact that I chose five of the most popular YouTubers, the sample may be too small to make accurate assumptions about the impact fashion influencers have on consumer behavior and environmental health. Applying a similar method to a wider range of YouTubers could make the argument stronger and attract more attention to the fast fashion crisis. There is also an entire niche group of fashion influencers who devote their videos to ethical consumption and sustainable fashion choices. Although these channels are not as popular, scholars could shift their focus toward the progress that has been made on the platform and if significant, sustainable growth is evident in contemporary videos from “ethical” fashion influencers.

Finding a more diverse selection of YouTubers might also work well for future studies. If viewers were involved in the research, they could list which fashion YouTubers they engage with most, and videos from that sample could be observed. This would provide a more accurate representation of what young consumers are actually watching, which could lead to a greater idea of the behaviors and lifestyle choices they are exposed to. Studying the reactions and

consumption behaviors of viewers might also yield meaningful results. Not all viewers are mindlessly consuming media or growing an emotional attachment to influencers. It is important to acknowledge that unethical consumption habits are present in contemporary media, but future research should also investigate how viewers are responding to those habits. If very few of them are mimicking unsustainable lifestyle choices, then YouTubers might have less influence than expected.

An interesting way to research the reactions of viewers could be a study of the comment sections of these videos. From looking through some of the comments myself, I noticed a pattern emerging that could further the evidence that fashion YouTubers need to be more direct and honest about the negative impact of their consumption habits. From observing a handful of comments, I could already see that the large majority of viewers reflect a desire to mimic the behaviors shown within the videos, or they discuss other topics unrelated to fashion. A further study of the comments could reveal if this pattern is widespread. It would also be interesting to study the success of different niche groups of fashion YouTubers and compare the influence they have over their viewers. Though sustainable fashion YouTubers have fewer subscribers, their audience might be far more committed to mimicking their lifestyle choices because they want to see an improvement in environmental health. My study leaves out the question of how viewers are engaging with the content and what their reaction is to the media they consume. If viewers watch the videos and then take a survey that asks them if they now feel a greater urge to go shopping for new clothing, purge their closets, go thrifting, make their own clothing from scratch, etc., that could uncover just how influential the videos are and which behaviors (ethical or unethical) viewers are most drawn to.

Although influencers are able to afford pricier clothing that is sustainably sourced, one potential reason for avoiding that clothing is that it is not accessible to the masses. Viewers trust their favorite YouTubers to guide them to the best cheap – but trendy – clothing stores, and promoting expensive, sustainable fashion could break that trust. For some people, fast fashion is the only affordable clothing option, and YouTubers might try to avoid the insensitivity of showing off items that are far beyond a realistic price range. Some videos are also labeled as ads, meaning a fast fashion brand paid the influencer to promote their clothing. With their immense success, these YouTubers could afford more costly, sustainable items; however, they are limited by the brands who want to sponsor them, since ads are one of their primary sources of income. Fashion influencers are also limited by the genre itself because it is almost impossible to take a sustainable approach to videos like clothing hauls or unboxings. These videos are unsustainable because YouTubers sort through an unnecessary amount of clothing and other items that they bought impulsively – items that will likely be filtered from their closets within a few months. Even when an influencer does a thrift haul, the issue of mass consumption is still dominant, which makes the video problematic. These ulterior motives for why so many fashion influencers promote fast fashion brands are important to consider in future studies.

Based on the research that was conducted, it is clear that the majority of YouTube's fashion influencers encourage a disposable lifestyle through unethical consumption habits. YouTubers have the ability to establish intimate connections with their viewers, and it is crucial that they use that ability for the betterment of the world. This study calls attention to the unethical behaviors that arise in fashion videos from some of the most influential people on YouTube – behaviors that viewers, and YouTubers themselves, might not recognize as being problematic. It is necessary that these influencers educate themselves on issues they are

promoting and reflect on how they can use their platform to achieve a greater purpose. This research can also enlighten viewers about unethical consumption habits that show up in YouTube videos so they can be more critical consumers of the media. The fast fashion crisis is a major contributor to climate change, yet its environmental costs are so often overlooked. Treating fashion as though it is a disposable commodity will only lead to more environmental catastrophe as time goes on, and rather than waiting for the catastrophe to unfold, social media influencers and their followers must be proactive in inciting a positive change.

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