

SHARE

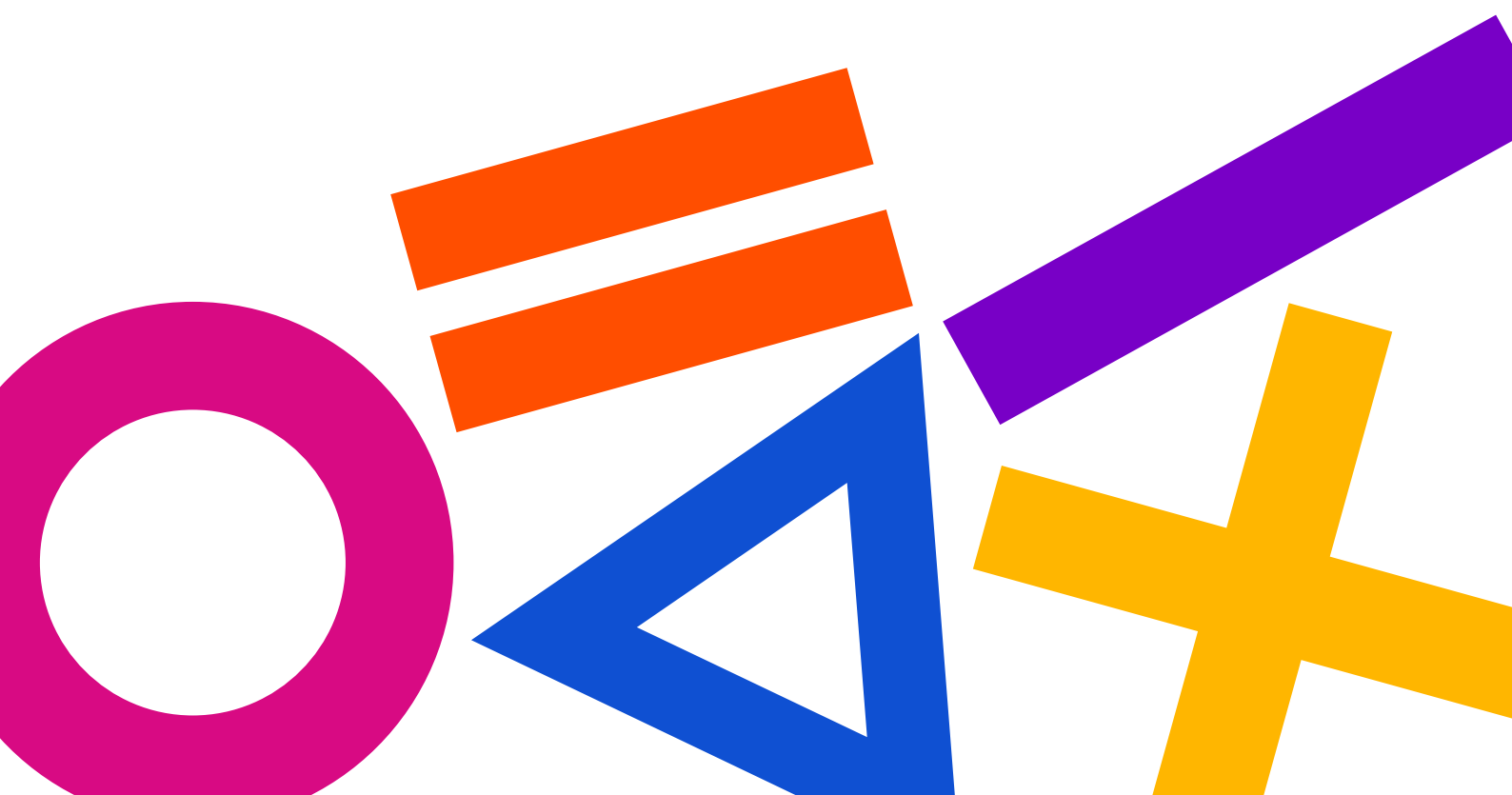
Influencer Culture

and its environmental impact

WRITTEN BY ABI TULLETT

DESIGNED BY SAM CROSS

JULY 2021



We are in the age of the influencer, where anybody with a phone can create a career at their fingertips by accruing a following on the likes of Instagram, YouTube, and more recently, TikTok.



When analysing the complexities of influencer culture, an angle that appears to remain unobserved is the environmental impact, specifically, the fact that [influencer culture promotes unethical and unsustainable consumption](#).

Before we dive in, let's first define influencers, specify which ones we are talking about, and explore the culture they have created.

An influencer is anyone with a platform, who has the power to sway or impact their audience with their words and actions. In short, if you have a big enough audience to wield influence, you are an influencer.

This ranges from politicians, to musicians, to actors and comedians, with followers in the thousands to the millions. In recent years, however, many influencers live in the realm of Instagram, Youtube and TikTok, and have quickly become a key tool for companies pursuing brand partnership opportunities to supplement their marketing. The culture, as it exists today, is intrinsically tied to [rising technology and consumerism](#).

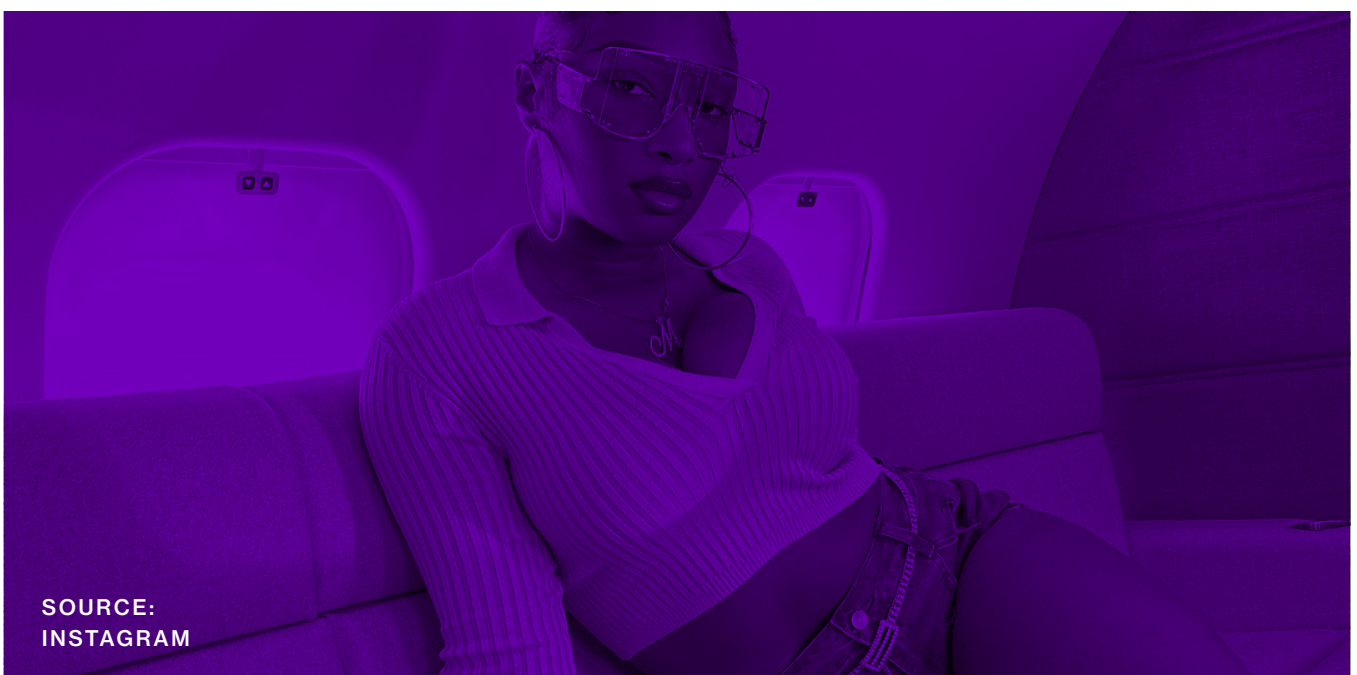
Specifically, we are talking about lifestyle influencers. Whether they're featuring shopping hauls, showing off their luxurious travels or just flexing their purchases, influencers have the power to [shape buying habits](#) and behaviour by simply posting or uploading original content to their platforms, which is often sponsored by the featured brands. Influencer marketing has quickly

become a [multibillion-dollar industry](#), which has opened up conversations around the ethics of this practice, specifically the environmental cost.

Why is this bad?

We live in a flourishing consumer culture, and it's this culture that influencers' livelihoods depend on, with abundant product ads and brand partnerships overflowing our feeds.

This has particularly sustained the fast fashion industry, with even the echelons of A-list celebrities becoming ambassadors for these brands. For example, Fashion Nova has produced collaborations with Cardi B and Meghan Thee Stallion, and has been endorsed with ads from Kylie Jenner, Khloe Kardashian and Doja Cat. This isn't limited to Fashion Nova, with countless other companies following suit. This also isn't limited to brand partnerships either, with substantial monthly, or even weekly, shopping hauls being the norm for many fashion influencers, who share their findings on social media. So what is the problem with this?



Fast fashion

Influencers have shaped and amplified a cultural shift in fashion and beauty consumption, and it is [leaving a huge mark on our planet](#).

Not only are they participating in hyperconsumption, but influencing their audiences to do the same. The average consumer buys 60% more clothing items compared to 20 years ago and approximately [80 billion garments](#) are consumed each year, with each garment kept for only half as long.

Trends come and go, often with the seasons, meaning fast fashion clothing is also made from cheap, unsustainable materials such as polyester and acrylic, inevitably leading to waste. The nature of fast fashion is that clothes are cheap, trendy and highly accessible with the click of a few buttons. With an emphasis on online shopping, and next day delivery becoming commonplace, this exacerbates the problem.

Growing demand for the latest trends has led to vast overproduction, generating [92 million tons](#) of yearly waste, with [£140 million's worth](#) of clothing going into landfills, and it doesn't stop there. The fashion industry produces [nearly 20% of global waste water and 10% of global carbon emissions](#), with the textiles industry majorly contributing to [plastic waste in our oceans](#); proving that fast fashion has a detrimental impact on the environment.

The environment is not the only thing impacted by this booming industry, with ethical implications on the people involved in production. The majority of clothing is made in sweatshops in countries such as China, India and Bangladesh, where the workers are subjected to extremely poor working conditions and very low wages.



SOURCE:
UNSPLASH

This allows brands like Shein, Zara, Missguided, Fashion Nova, H&M and countless others to sell their clothing cheaply, and in vast quantities.

According to [Vox](#), Zara launches more than 20 collections per year, Missguided introduces around 1000 new styles each month, and Fashion Nova releases up to 900 new items weekly. This is possible because of the exploitation of sweatshop workers, while also having adverse effects on the environment, with the fast fashion industry being a major contributor to climate change.

Despite the focus on these retailers, this is not limited to fast fashion, with luxury brands utilising sweatshops to sell their products

with an incredibly high markup. While part of the problem is participation in hyper consumerism, influencers are also sent countless packages from brands with free items to try and share with their audience.

This contributes to waste, which we have seen is harmful to the planet, but also calls some ethics into question. While these aren't necessarily environmental issues, it's worth pointing out that many influencers continue to inauthentically advertise useless products to their audiences, for their own financial gain.



SOURCE:
DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

Travel

Another key aspect of the influencer lifestyle is frequent travel to new and exciting destinations, sometimes sponsored by brands or events, with plenty of photo ops to supplement their feed. According to the [BBC](#), 2.4% of global CO² emissions come from air travel. Combined with other aviation-related gasses, the flight industry accounts for [5% of global warming](#) emissions.

To put this into perspective, a round trip from London to San Francisco emits more than twice the emissions produced by a family car in a year. Shorter flights are also damaging, with a return flight from London to Berlin emitting three times the emissions saved from a year of recycling.

With the rate of influencer travel, this is a significant part of the problem, made even worse by the number of celebrities and influencers who fly on private jets, which is an extremely unsustainable way of flying in an already unsustainable mode of travel. The consequences don't even stop there. Many careless travellers, whose priority is to capture perfect photos, [damage natural landmarks, fragile ecosystems and harm endangered species](#).

With little accountability, this is an ongoing problem caused by influencer and social media culture where the goal is likes, shares and ad revenue, often manifesting as ignorance, resulting in harm to these settings. Despite the environmental dangers of supporting fast fashion, and other unsustainable habits, flying is the largest component of most people's carbon footprint.



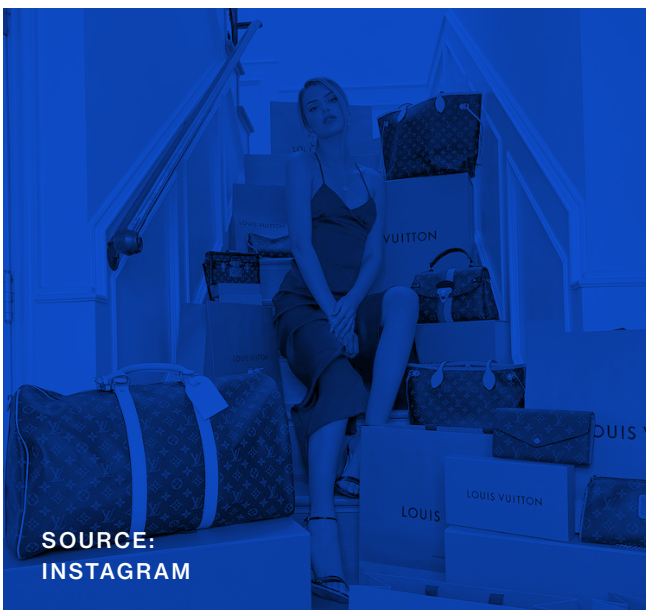
Overall impact of the influencer lifestyle

Aside from the hyper consumption fueling the fast fashion industry and travel that contributes and encourages audiences to participate in frequent flying, the overall lifestyle of the average influencer is not sustainable. Many social media celebrities who gain traction on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok move out to LA, with some of the more successful ones sharing mansions and driving multiple cars around from one destination to the next. Powering these large homes and fueling these cars only adds to carbon emissions that are produced. It is problematic to endorse these consumer behaviours when considering the environmental and ethical cost.

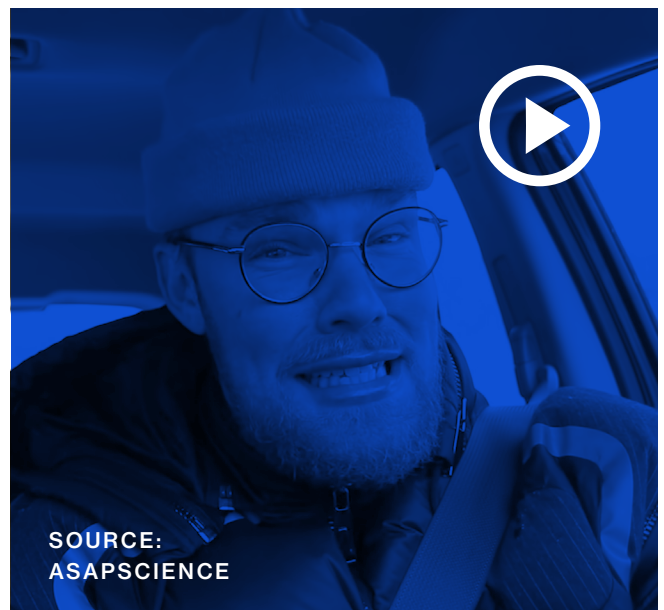
Whilst influencer's individual choices are of environmental concern, the main issue is the wider normalisation of this lifestyle. [From a fashion sense](#), influencers have normalised the idea that an individual should own hundreds of garments, should never repeat outfits, should shop often, spend hundreds on each shopping trip, and throw away clothes that are no longer of use. As for travel, seeing images of influencers constantly jetting

off promotes frequent travel, meaning that people may come to expect multiple foreign trips a year, thus further contributing to climate breakdown. Therefore, influencer impact is much greater than their own personal output as it serves to create a culture of over consumption and frequent flying, hurting the planet vastly more. The individual consumption of influencers is harmful, but it is the normalisation of their way of consuming that is the most pernicious aspect of influencer culture.

To put it into perspective, we can estimate what this impact would look like if everybody lived like influencers. Using a carbon footprint calculator, [YouTubers from AsapScience](#) posit that we would need 12.9 earths, to support the fashion, transport, housing and travel that encapsulates influencer culture. More specifically, if everyone consumed fashion the way influencers do, we would see a [77% increase in CO² emissions](#). Despite consumers becoming more and more desensitised to this way of living, these statistics are alarming, and far from normal.



SOURCE:
INSTAGRAM



SOURCE:
ASAPSCIENCE

Ethical alternatives and sustainable solutions

It isn't all bad news for the influencer marketing industry, as there are alternatives. While many influencers capture the lifestyle previously outlined, there is a rising number of influencers who are using their platform to promote more ethical and sustainable choices through fashion and travel. An increasing number of fashion influencers are denouncing fast fashion brands and condemning the industry, while encouraging audiences to shop second hand, posting their Depop finds, thrift shop hauls and charity shop bargains. This is supplemented by a growing flux of environmentally conscious brands like Patagonia and Everlane, that use sustainable and recycled fabrics, have a transparent supply chain and (like Patagonia) even participate in [environmental activism](#).

This is further highlighted by influencers who are committing to minimalist fashion and an overall minimalist lifestyle, which has been further popularised by Marie Kondo, who tells us that we should only keep items that 'spark joy.' These messages are raising awareness and implanting knowledge around sustainable consumption, which advocates for [buying less, and buying smart](#).

This also begs the question – are some of these influencers interested in fashion or in consumption? Sustainable influencers are proving you can participate in fashion and travel without also participating in over consumption and exploitation of people and the planet. They encourage their audiences to shop ethically, while also emphasising the importance of timeless pieces over passing trends, to ensure the longevity of clothing, as well as making more conscious decisions when travelling abroad.



Sustainable fashion influencers

While influencer culture overall is perpetuating overconsumption and contributing to unsustainable behaviour, there are a host of content creators who are fighting against this status quo. Kathleen Elie is the influencer behind 'consciousnchic', where she advocates for sustainability and inclusivity. Elie's feed includes brightly coloured fashion looks, motivational quotes and educational Instagram Reels. Below is a Reel encouraging her followers to rethink throwing their clothing away, with another Reel outlining some sustainable shopping tips.

Venetia La Manna is an anti-fast fashion campaigner and influencer who creates content for her 140k followers ranging from infographics to charity shop styled outfits. Below, La Manna shares an infographic carousel highlighting the waste crisis caused by the fashion industry. Another example showcases an outfit that was entirely sourced from charity shops, proving that you can be stylish and fashion forward without contributing to exploitation and unsustainability. She links the best London charity shops and encourages her followers to opt for secondhand clothing.



Sustainable travel influencers

There is also an emerging group of [sustainable travel influencers](#) who are demonstrating different, eco-friendly approaches to tourism. One example is 'slow travel', which lessens carbon emissions by encouraging travellers to walk, or take trains and buses rather than flights. They also promote lesser known tourist spots to help minimise overcrowding and advocate for local businesses.

Ashley Renne is an influencer who is passionate about exploring other cultures through eco-friendly travel. She shares a wide range of content around these topics, including infographics that promote and inform her large audience about ethical and sustainable travelling, while touching on veganism, racial issues, zero-waste and more. On the right, Renne shares news about airline sustainability and United's plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We also have an example of an infographic posted with tips for reducing waste while travelling.



Another sustainable influencer that is promoting alternatives to typical modes of travel is Torbjørn C. Pedersen, or 'Thor.' With just under 37k followers on Instagram, Pedersen documents his goal of travelling to every country in the world without taking a single flight – with 194 accomplished so far. Instead of air travel, Pedersen has been successful in his commitment to move primarily by trains, buses and even boats. Not only is this more environmentally friendly, but a way to be more connected to locals and other travellers for a more authentic experience. Pedersen has gone as far as to commit to not returning home until his goal of visiting every country in the world has been fulfilled. While this isn't feasible for the average tourist, it does prove that it's possible to see the world sustainably, by opting for more eco-friendly forms of transport.



After thoughts

As we have covered, there is an impact on people and the planet resulting from the culture promoted by social media celebrities. While some may disagree, many believe those with influence have the responsibility to use their platform for good.

Despite it being widely known, there are still those who are unaware of the harms of fast fashion and frequent travel, let alone understand how they can take action themselves. Education is key here. Even on the smaller scale of knowing where the products you promote have come from, influencers should be reassessing whether they should be pushing those items to their audience. If an individual is granted a platform big enough to influence, they should influence people to make better choices and consume more consciously, and as an audience, we should look to these types of influencers for our own inspiration.

SHARE

Want to find out more?

Get in touch

TALKTOUS@SHARECREATIVE.COM