

## How Do Digital Platforms Support Sustainable Business Models in the Fashion Industry? - A literature-based analysis

Lin Lin \*, Nizar Abdelkafi \*, Margherita Pero \*

\* Politecnico di Milano, Department of Management and Engineering, Via Lambruschini 4/B, 20156 Milan, Italy,  
([lin.lin@polimi.it](mailto:lin.lin@polimi.it), [nizar.abdelkafi@polimi.it](mailto:nizar.abdelkafi@polimi.it), [margherita.pero@polimi.it](mailto:margherita.pero@polimi.it))

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**Abstract:** With growing environmental and social concerns in the fashion industry, the need for sustainable practices has become increasingly critical. Platforms, particularly digital platforms, are playing an increasingly important role in enabling sustainable fashion by fostering collaboration among networks of fashion stakeholders, enhancing transparency in supply chains, and driving circular economy innovation. For instance, OnTheList, Privé by Zalando, and Veepee focus on managing surplus inventory for fashion brands. Vestiaire Collective and Vinted focus on selling second-hand fashion items. Rent the Runway, HURR Collective, and Le Closet focus on fashion rental services, while platforms such as SourceMap, TrusTrace, and Fairly Made contribute to improving supply chain transparency. Given both the potential and the demonstrated ability of digital platforms to support sustainability in fashion, this paper examines how digital platforms contribute to the sustainability transition in the fashion industry and how they create and capture value through business models, stakeholder engagement, and technology integration. Through a systematic literature review, the study identifies four types of digital platforms driving sustainability in the fashion industry. These platforms promote circular economy models, reduce waste, and improve resource efficiency. The research examines how these platforms create value for stakeholders by generating revenue, fostering brand loyalty, and encouraging sustainable consumer behavior. It also explores the role of technology, highlighting the potential of digital platforms to advance both environmental and social goals in fashion. This paper lays the groundwork for future research and practical applications of sustainable digital business models in the fashion industry.

**Keywords:** Fashion; Platforms; Sustainability; Value Creation; Value Capture

### 1. Introduction

Industry 4.0 technologies have significantly transformed the fashion industry by enhancing various aspects of production, manufacturing, and distribution (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). Fast fashion brands such as H&M and Zara launch between 2 and 20 collections per year, updating styles as frequently as every five weeks to sustain consumer interest (Dalla Chiesa et al., 2024). While the fashion industry is highly profitable and renowned for its creativity and innovation, it is also one of the most environmentally and socially damaging sectors (Dalla Chiesa et al., 2024). The intense competition within fashion has often led companies to prioritise economic gains over the environmental and social dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which advocates for balanced ecological, social, and economic development (Elkington, 1997). The rapid trend cycles and short lifespans of fashion further intensify the sustainable challenges (Dalla Chiesa et al., 2024).

In response to the unsustainable nature of fast fashion, scholars have proposed several different alternative sustainable business models, including slow fashion (McNeill & Snowdon, 2019), the circular economy (Abbate et al., 2023), the sharing economy (Liu et al., 2023), and virtual fashion consumption (Choi, 2022). Slow fashion prioritizes values such as quality, authenticity, craftsmanship, and sustainability, promoting durable

garments, local production, and mindful consumption (Abbate et al., 2023). Circular economy fashion models include product longevity, resale, rental and sharing systems, and materials recycling (Barletta et al., 2024). Huynh (2022) further categorizes these into blockchain-based, service-based, and demand-driven models. The sharing economy promotes decentralized, fair, and sustainable consumption by enabling access to products through collaborative platforms. Numerous digital sharing platforms worldwide are gaining attention in the fashion market, such as Rent the Runway (US), ByRotation (UK), Air Closet (Japan), and Style Theory (Singapore), which encourage sustainable collaborative consumption by offering fashion products at affordable prices (Liu et al., 2023). Meanwhile, digital fashion is transforming the industry through technologies like 3D modelling, VR/AR, digital twinning, and virtual fittings, enabling new forms of design, production, marketing, and consumption (Xin et al., 2025). Virtual fashion, as a subset of the digital fashion, refers to computer-generated garments for avatars or digital self-representation, reshaping how fashion is experienced and consumed in online spaces (Cross et al., 2025). Digital platforms are playing a pivotal role in enabling sustainable business practices in fashion.

From a practical perspective, a wide range of established fashion digital platforms are already operating across distinct functional fashion areas. For instance, OnTheList, Privé by Zalando and Veepee specialize in managing

surplus inventory; Vestiaire Collective and Vinted focus on second-hand fashion; while Rent the Runway, HURR Collective, and Le Closet provide fashion rental services. At the same time, platforms such as, TrusTrace, and Fairly Made contribute to enhancing supply chain transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a key driver of changing consumer behavior, accelerating the adoption of digital technologies and encouraging fashion companies to engage customers through diverse forms of digitalization (Cross et al., 2025).

However, despite growing optimism about the potential of digital platforms to advance sustainability in fashion, several scholars question their actual effectiveness. Although circular and sharing economy models are widely promoted, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) reports that only 1% of used clothing is currently reused, with the majority still being incinerated or sent to landfill. Buchel et al. (2022) further argue that the fashion industry largely remains entrenched in a linear model. Furthermore, a study by MIT indicates that not all garments are suitable for rental, as the logistics and cleaning involved may, in some cases, produce higher carbon emissions than traditional ownership (Arnold, 2024; Vishkaei, 2024).

To gain a more objective understanding of whether and how digital platforms can support fashion companies in their sustainable transition, this study begins with a systematic literature review to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of peer-reviewed research. Rather than focusing solely on the supportive functions of digital platforms in promoting sustainability within the fashion industry, it also examines the underlying business models. Specifically, the review explores how digital platforms enable value creation in sustainable fashion and how fashion companies capture the corresponding value.

Accordingly, this research is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: What are the state-of-the-art digital platforms for sustainable fashion, and how do they create sustainability value for stakeholders?

RQ2: How do fashion companies capture the sustainability value generated through these platforms?

This paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the rationale for adopting the perspective that digital fashion platforms and sustainable business models can support the transition of the fashion industry towards sustainable development. Section three describes the systematic literature review methodology applied in this study. Section four presents the findings, followed by a discussion of the results in the subsequent section. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining current limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Background

### 2.1. Fashion Digital Platforms

Digital platforms have created more opportunities for companies to shift from traditional innovation strategies to

sustainability-oriented innovation strategies (Cenamor et al., 2019). Digital platforms enhance firms' technological capabilities for connectivity, information exchange, and online collaboration, enabling access to external resources and potentially supporting sustainability-oriented innovation (Wang et al., 2023).

The application of information technology has improved the efficiency of information processing and communication, becoming a key driver of the sharing economy (Liu et al., 2023). Technology not only simplifies and reduces the cost of economic activities but also facilitates interactions between individuals and between companies and consumers, leading to the emergence of many digital platform innovations based on sharing concepts. At the same time, technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), and blockchain have further enhanced system responsiveness, reliability, and transparency, playing a particularly important role in improving information transparency (Liu et al., 2023). In the fashion industry, although practices like renting, swapping, and reselling have long existed, the advent of digital sharing platforms has significantly scaled these behaviours, allowing consumers to temporarily access products at a fraction of their retail cost, while simultaneously offering consumers discounts, and enabling fashion companies to generate tangible profits (Bruyne & Verleye, 2022).

As Statista (2024) reported, in 2023, the global market value of second-hand and resale clothing was estimated at \$197 billion. A key driver of digital platform growth in fashion is the generational shift in consumer behaviour. Gen Y, born from 1996 and often seen as “born with technology”, show greater support for the sharing economy and sustainability than previous generations (Liu et al., 2023). Their preferences may accelerate the adoption of digital platforms, highlighting their role in advancing the industry's shift toward sustainability.

### 2.2 Fashion Sustainable Business Models

Growing consumer awareness of sustainability is increasing demand for alternatives to fast fashion and prompting companies to shift their business models toward circularity and reduced consumption (Todeschini et al., 2017). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) not only reflects a company's ethical and moral obligations but also serves as a strategic response to environmental and social challenges, enhancing brand reputation and strengthening stakeholder relations (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). Within this context, sustainable business models are essential for integrating and balancing ecological, social, and economic value creation, thereby supporting innovation, strategic management, and long-term competitiveness during the transition to sustainability (Lüdeke-Freund et al., 2018). Consequently, when fashion companies operate through digital platforms, it is crucial that they identify the sustainable value they generate and the mechanisms through which this value can be effectively monetized.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021) to ensure a transparent and rigorous review process, enhancing the reliability of the findings. Scopus was chosen as the primary database due to its broad and authoritative coverage in fields relevant to this research.

The research query was conducted on 2 April 2025, using the keywords “fashion AND platform AND sustainab\*” within the fields of article title, abstract, and keywords. The search was limited to English-language articles published from 2020 onwards, as most of the literature discussing the emerging intersection of digital platforms and sustainable fashion has been published during this period, reflecting the latest developments and trends in the field. The initial search across relevant subject areas yielded 116 articles. To ensure academic rigor, 37 Q2, Q3, and Q4 articles (based on the 2023 SJR) were excluded, considering the higher quality of academic peer-reviewed papers in Q1. The remaining 80 abstracts were screened, and articles unrelated to digital platforms in the fashion industry or lacking a clear link to sustainability, such as those focused on tourism, food, or physical marketplaces, were removed. Papers that merely introduced technologies without a sustainability perspective or that mentioned digital platforms only briefly without a platform-centred analysis were also excluded. As a result, 27 articles were selected for full-text review. The entire screening process is outlined in Figure 1.

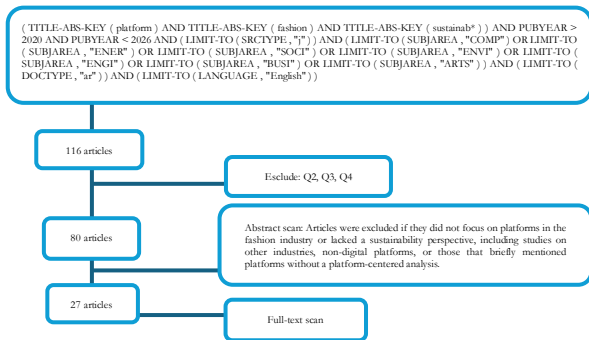


Figure 1: The sample selection process

During the abstract screening and full-text review, we carefully identified the main types of digital platforms each article focused on. This step was systematically documented in a table and is presented in Table 1. It provides the foundation for the following section, where we analyse the functions of these digital platforms, the mechanisms through which they create sustainable value, how fashion companies monetize the value, and the roles of consumers and technologies in the process of value creation and delivery.

Table 1: Analysis of the sample literature

Code	Authors	Sharing Platforms	Digital Sustainability-Supporting Platforms	Crowdfunding Platforms	Virtual Fashion platforms
1	Dekhili et al., 2025	X			
2	Cross et al., 2025				X
3	Xin et al., 2025				X
4	Yao et al., 2025	X			
5	Wang et al., 2024				
6	Dalla Chiesa et al., 2022			X	
7	Barlesta et al., 2024	X			
8	Chen et al., 2024		X		
9	Manno et al., 2024		X		
10	Cardillo-Abdel et al., 2024		X		
11	Bastone et al., 2024	X			
12	Baurne & Verleye, 2022	X			
13	Westerberg & Martinez, 2023	X			
14	Lan & Watkins, 2023	X			
15	Liu et al., 2023	X			
16	Amasawa et al., 2023	X			
17	Quiles-Soler et al., 2023	X	X		
18	Jain et al., 2022	X			

19	McCov & Chi, 2022	X	X		
20	Sailer et al., 2022		X		
21	Brylages et al., 2022		X		
22	Choi, 2022				X
23	Lee et al., 2021	X			
24	Kim et al., 2021	X			
25	Shrivastava et al., 2021	X	X		
26	Cocquyt et al., 2020	X			
27	Lee & Huang, 2020	X			

## 4. Results

Based on a thematic analysis of the selected literature, the authors observe a four-category typology of digital platforms that support sustainable practices in the fashion industry. This framework was developed inductively, each category reflecting a distinct functional role: (i) sharing platforms enable rental and resale, reducing textile waste; (ii) supporting platforms such as social media and brand websites communicate sustainability efforts; (iii) crowdfunding platforms finance eco-initiatives; and (iv) virtual fashion platforms, including AR, VR, and NFTs, offer dematerialized alternatives. Each category is discussed in detail in the following sections.

### 4.1 Sharing platforms

Fashion sharing platforms, mainly second-hand trading and rental services, promote sustainability by encouraging garment reuse and lowering demand for new clothes. While both reduce fashion’s environmental impact, they function differently and attract consumers for distinct reasons.

Second-hand fashion platforms resell pre-owned garments, extending clothing life and reducing waste. They appeal mainly to cost-conscious and environmentally aware consumers (Bastone et al., 2024; Bruyne & Verleye, 2022). In China, platforms like Xianyu and Zhier have popularized second-hand fashion among Gen Y and Gen Z, driven by savings, convenience, and social interaction (Liu et al., 2023). Yao et al. (2025) found that cultural and educational factors shape attitudes, with Nordic consumers generally more open than those in China. Customer satisfaction depends on price, quality, service, and effective promotions (Kim et al., 2021). Marketing that highlights product features or urgency boosts purchase intent, while emotional storytelling via social media builds trust (Kim et al., 2021). AI enhances user experience through personalized recommendations, and micro-influencers promote second-hand shopping as enjoyable (Shrivastava et al., 2021). Consumers often prioritise convenience and affordability, choose items based on condition and trends, and rely on reviews and secure payments due to trust concerns, with financial motives typically outweighing sustainability considerations (Jain et al., 2022; Lan & Watkins, 2022; Lee et al., 2021; Westerberg & Martinez, 2023).

Fashion rental platforms, also known as Clothing Sharing Platforms (CSPs), allow users to rent garments for a limited time through a subscription model, promoting sustainability by encouraging access over ownership (Cocquyt et al., 2020, Lee & Huang, 2020). Rental services appeal to consumers seeking variety, new styles, or high-quality clothing without long-term commitment, but face challenges in user growth and financial sustainability due to limited consumer familiarity and personal factors such as age, gender, and sustainability attitudes (Cocquyt et al.,

2020). Compared to second-hand platforms, rental services often involve more complex logistics and higher operational costs (Arnold, 2024; Vishkaei, 2024), and require strong customer engagement to build loyalty due to the temporary nature of the clothing. While rental platforms can benefit from social media promotion, the emotional connection to the clothes is often weaker, as users do not own the items (Amasawa et al., 2023).

### 4.2 Digital sustainability-supporting platforms

Digital platforms are crucial for advancing sustainability in fashion by supporting CSR, engaging consumers, and enabling value co-creation beyond product sales (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). Tools like social media, brand websites, and online surveys help brands communicate sustainability efforts, gather consumer insights, and influence purchasing decisions (Chen et al., 2024; Quiles-Soler et al., 2023; Sailer et al., 2022).

Sustainable fashion companies increasingly focus on CSR areas including employee engagement, environmental protection, and waste management, while public environmental policies enhance stakeholder trust and market position (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok play a key role in marketing and CSR by sharing sustainability content and fostering interaction (Apetrei et al., 2024; Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). To ensure credibility and avoid greenwashing, many brands adopt third-party certifications such as GOTS and publish externally audited codes of conduct (Brydges et al., 2022). Digital tools such as chatbots, apps, and voice assistants like Alexa and Google Assistant are increasingly used to communicate sustainable practices and guide consumers (Manzo et al., 2024). Brand websites also emphasize digital inclusivity and ethics by following accessibility standards like WCAG and using technologies such as Audio Eye to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (McCoy & Chi, 2022). Understanding consumer sustainability awareness is vital, with platforms such as Google Forms, Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, Facebook groups, and Reddit offering cost-effective ways to collect genuine feedback (Charmley et al., 2022; Copeland, 2024; Liu et al., 2023).

Revenue for these sustainability-focused platforms mainly comes from data, content delivery, and insights rather than direct sales. By providing consumer analytics, targeted advertising, and subscription content, they help brands influence green behaviors and capture indirect value, facilitating fashion’s sustainability transition.

### 4.3 Crowdfunding platforms

Crowdfunding is a powerful financing tool that helps emerging companies and individual projects secure funds (Mollick & Robb, 2016). Kickstarter, a leading platform, has raised over four billion USD for more than 155,000 projects, including around 161 million USD for fashion-related campaigns, demonstrating its growing role in funding innovative fashion initiatives (Dalla Chiesa et al., 2024). By using platforms like Kickstarter, fashion

entrepreneurs can obtain early-stage funding, test market demand, and engage consumers, providing an accessible alternative to traditional financing for small businesses and emerging designers (Dalla Chiesa et al., 2024). Chiesa et al. (2022) identified four key success factors for fashion crowdfunding campaigns: product innovativeness, environmental sustainability, premium pricing, and early-stage lifecycle positioning, with environmental concerns generally having a stronger impact on funding than social sustainability.

### 4.4 Virtual fashion platforms

The rise of Industry 5.0 and the integration of AI, blockchain, Web 3.0, and extended reality are driving virtual fashion as a new space for innovation, branding, and sustainability in the fashion industry (Lin et al., 2024).

VR and AR are used to create virtual stores, fashion shows, try-on features, and interactive brand experiences, as seen in Balenciaga’s Fortnite collaboration and Burberry’s AR app, enhancing storytelling, boosting consumer interest, and supporting sustainable products (Cross et al., 2025, Lin et al., 2024). Digital platforms such as DressX also reduce environmental impact, with each digital garment generating up to 97% fewer carbon emissions than physical clothing (Joy et al., 2022). Major brands such as Gucci, Nike, H&M, Bershka, and Fendi have launched digital collections on platforms like Roblox, while blockchain-enabled NFTs allow users to wear, trade, and own digital fashion, and revenue-sharing models, in which platforms provide the infrastructure and brands share a portion of sales, support commercial sustainability (Huang et al., 2023; Manzo et al., 2024). Metaverse platforms act as digital marketplaces that charge access fees while allowing brand pricing control, and virtual try-on tools like Amazon’s AR Mirror and Snap’s Nike partnership help lower returns, costs, and environmental waste (Wagner & Kabalska, 2023; Watanabe et al., 2021). Chan et al. (2024) identified six types of digital fashion products, including AR filters, NFTs, digital skins, virtual influencers, superimposed images, and digital twins, each offering unique value and consumer interaction. These innovations reflect a shift toward digital fashion ecosystems that integrate creativity, sustainability, and technology, enabling brands to engage consumers and support environmental goals.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the lack of comprehensive research on the application of digital platforms in the fashion industry, this study adopts a systematic literature review to examine existing studies and classify the types of digital platforms used in sustainable fashion. We observe that digital platforms play a vital role in promoting sustainability in the fashion industry through four main types. First, sharing platforms, such as second-hand trading and rental services, support the circular economy by encouraging reuse and reducing textile waste. Second, digital sustainability-supporting platforms, including social media, brand websites, and online tools, enhance consumer engagement and help brands effectively communicate their

sustainability efforts. Third, crowdfunding platforms facilitate the development of sustainable fashion by providing financial support for environmentally and socially responsible initiatives, fostering innovation and community participation. Fourth, virtual fashion platforms, which incorporate technologies like AR, VR, and NFTs, promote dematerialised consumption by reducing the need for physical production.

Among these, sharing platforms, digital sustainability-supporting platforms, and virtual fashion platforms contribute to sustainability by offering alternative consumption models that reduce dependence on new product manufacturing. By promoting reuse, virtual experiences, and greater sustainability awareness, these platforms help minimise environmental pollution and enhance the social impact of sustainable fashion consumption. Fashion companies can potentially leverage these platforms to align with and convey the sustainable values they seek to communicate to their customers.

These platforms promote sustainability and create value through both direct and indirect monetization models. Directly monetizing platforms include Vinted and Rent the Runway, which generate income by offering second-hand or rental fashion; crowdfunding platforms that finance sustainable fashion projects; virtual platforms using NFTs to sell digital assets. Indirectly monetizing platforms such as social media and brand websites build loyal communities and drive revenue through customer engagement. Together, these platforms contribute to sustainability in diverse and impactful ways.

The adoption of digital platforms in fashion is not without limitations. For instance, digital platforms like Vinted support sustainable fashion by promoting reuse, yet their rapid growth raises environmental concerns due to delivery emissions and potential overconsumption, while also potentially encouraging impulsive buying despite efforts to lower carbon footprints through bundling and discounts (Dekhili et al., 2025). Luxury brands like Burberry and Montblanc known for their exclusivity, might use platforms to sell excess inventory at discounted prices, but this can undermine their brand value and reputation (Wang et al., 2024). Despite sustainability claims and recycling commitments by brands like Prada, Moncler, and H&M, the latter was reported to incinerate 12 tons of unsold clothing in 2018, drawing criticism for continuing to destroy stock despite pledges to avoid it, which are actions beyond platform control (Feng & Ngai, 2020). While rental models are effective for items like wedding dresses or children’s clothing (Arnold, 2024), they do not fully address broader fashion waste issues, as they still require extensive logistics and distribution.

Therefore, while digital platforms have the potential to support sustainable fashion, fashion companies must carefully integrate the digital platforms with deliberately designed sustainability business strategies to avoid negative impacts and maximize their environmental and social benefits.

Our classification shows that most scholarly research focuses on sharing, digital sustainability-supporting, and

virtual fashion platforms. Crowdfunding platforms have received less attention, and some important real-world platforms were not identified in the papers we reviewed. We recognize that other platform categories also support sustainability, such as supply chain management platforms that enhance transparency, traceability, and coordination, as well as educational platforms like MOOCs that fill gaps in business education by disseminating corporate sustainability knowledge. These platforms contribute to innovation and value creation within the fashion industry. Research demonstrates that sustainable supply chain practices, including reverse remanufacturing, technology adoption, and agent-based systems, improve responsiveness and reduce costs (Bahadoran Baghbadorani et al., 2023; Xin et al., 2025). Additionally, MOOCs expand access to sustainable fashion education by assisting practitioners and talent with sustainable design solutions, while reaching a global audience through education on diverse sustainable business models (Pedersen et al., 2022).

Taken together, these findings not only provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the role of digital platforms in sustainable fashion but also highlight critical gaps and emerging avenues for future empirical research aimed at advancing sustainability transitions in the industry.

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