

MCLEUKER FASHION INTELLIGENCE • 2026

# Fast Fashion's Grip on Generation Z

Behavioural Paradox • Social Drivers • The Shift to  
Secondhand

RESEARCH REPORT • JUNE 2026

# Executive Summary

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Generation Z (born 1997–2012) now represents the most influential cohort in fashion, yet their relationship with fast fashion is defined by contradiction. While 58% of Gen Z consumers say they prioritise secondhand over new purchases, the majority continue to fuel ultra-fast platforms such as Shein, Temu and Shein-adjacent brands through social-media-driven impulse buying.

**Core finding:** Gen Z exhibits a pronounced **attitude-behaviour gap** that is more nuanced than previous generations. Personal values strongly predict both sustainable and fast-fashion purchases, but social media exposure and FOMO override ethical intentions at the point of sale. The result is simultaneous growth in resale and continued fast-fashion volume.

This report synthesises 2025–2026 data from McKinsey State of Fashion, ThredUp Resale Report 2026, peer-reviewed studies (Springer, 2025), and consumer surveys to map the behavioural, psychological and market implications.

# Key Statistics at a Glance

58%

OF GEN Z NOW PRIORITISE  
SECONDHAND OVER NEW CLOTHING

40%

OF SECONDHAND MARKET GROWTH  
DRIVEN BY GEN Z (THREDUP 2026)

68%

OF GEN Z BUY CLOTHING BASED ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

2×

FASTER SPENDING GROWTH VS  
PREVIOUS GENERATIONS (MCKINSEY  
2026)

| Metric                          | Finding                                                                   | Source                              |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Fast fashion purchase frequency | 17% weekly, 62% monthly among surveyed Gen Z students                     | Sheffield Hallam / Springer studies |
| BNPL usage for clothing         | 55% of Gen Z have used Buy Now Pay Later for unaffordable fast fashion    | Sustainable Agency 2026             |
| Global secondhand market        | Projected \$393 billion by 2030; Gen Z + Millennials drive >70% of growth | ThredUp Resale Report 2026          |
| Social media influence          | 48% cite “keeping up with trends” as primary purchase driver              | Rawshot / ThredUp surveys           |

| Metric                 | Finding                                                                                                   | Source                           |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Attitude-behaviour gap | No significant gap observed in sustainable purchases when values are strong; gap persists in fast fashion | Springer Fashion & Textiles 2025 |

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# The Gen Z Paradox: Values vs Volume

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Multiple 2025–2026 studies confirm that Gen Z simultaneously holds strong environmental and ethical concerns while maintaining high fast-fashion consumption. The Springer 2025 study of 289 female Gen Z college students found that personal values significantly influence both sustainable and fast-fashion purchasing behaviour, yet the two markets coexist rather than compete directly.

## Why the contradiction persists

- **Identity expression through volume:** 58% of Gen Z say they shop to express identity; fast fashion enables rapid iteration of micro-trends.
- **Perceived affordability:** Low price points reduce perceived risk of impulse purchases, even when consumers know the environmental cost.
- **Digital-first discovery:** TikTok and Instagram Reels surface new items daily, shortening the consideration cycle to hours.

**Key academic insight (Springer 2025):** Unlike older cohorts, Gen Z shows **no statistically significant attitude-behaviour gap** when purchasing sustainable fashion. When values are internalised, sustainable purchases follow. The persistent fast-fashion volume therefore reflects competing values (trend participation, social belonging) rather than hypocrisy.

## Social Media: The Primary Accelerator

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68% of Gen Z report purchasing clothing directly because of social media content. Influencer credibility and platform algorithms create a continuous feed of “must-have”

micro-trends that fast-fashion brands replicate within weeks. This environment rewards speed over longevity and normalises overconsumption.

## Psychological drivers

- FOMO and social comparison
- Dopamine loops from “haul” videos
- Perceived scarcity of limited drops
- Influencer-as-peer effect

## Market consequences

- Average wardrobe turnover accelerating
- 40% of Gen Z report clothes they no longer wear
- Rise of “wear once” culture
- Pressure on mental health and finances (BNPL debt)

# Environmental and Psychological Toll

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Gen Z's fast-fashion consumption contributes to the well-documented environmental burden of the industry (textile waste, water use, carbon). At the individual level, studies link overconsumption to increased anxiety, decision fatigue and post-purchase regret — phenomena now openly discussed on TikTok and Instagram.

## Emerging counter-trend

Despite the volume, Gen Z is also the generation most likely to resell or donate unwanted items. ThredUp reports that new secondhand shoppers (largely Gen Z) will account for 64% of incremental resale spend through 2030. This suggests the same cohort driving fast-fashion volume is simultaneously building the infrastructure for circularity.

# The Structural Shift: Secondhand Becomes Default

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ThredUp's 2026 Resale Report marks a turning point: 46% of all consumers (and a higher share of Gen Z) now browse resale platforms before considering new purchases. Gen Z is projected to drive 40% of secondhand growth, followed by Millennials at 31%.

| Generation  | Projected share of resale growth to 2030 | Priority of secondhand vs new |
|-------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Gen Z       | 40%                                      | 58% prioritise secondhand     |
| Millennials | 31%                                      | 55% prioritise secondhand     |

| Generation    | Projected share of resale growth to 2030 | Priority of secondhand vs new |
|---------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Older cohorts | 29%                                      | Lower preference              |

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This is not a passing trend but a structural change. Brands that fail to integrate resale, rental or repair will lose relevance with the cohort that will dominate spending power by 2029 (McKinsey).

# Implications for Brands & Policymakers

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## For fast-fashion & ultra-fast platforms

- Transparency and traceability are now table stakes
- Integrate resale or circular services or risk brand rejection
- Shift from volume to “fewer, better” storytelling to retain Gen Z loyalty

## For sustainable & resale platforms

- Capitalise on Gen Z’s preference for secondhand
- Use social proof and influencer partnerships to normalise resale
- Address the “thrift now, Shein later” contradiction with seamless UX

**Strategic takeaway:** The winners in the next five years will not be pure fast-fashion or pure sustainable brands, but those that help Gen Z reconcile their desire for constant newness with their stated values — through circular models, transparent pricing, and community-driven discovery.

## Conclusion

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Fast fashion continues to shape Gen Z consumer behaviour through social media amplification and low-friction purchasing, yet the same generation is accelerating the shift toward secondhand and circular models at unprecedented speed. The paradox is real, but it is not static: values are increasingly translating into sustainable action when supported by convenient resale infrastructure.

By 2030, Gen Z and Millennials will control the majority of global fashion spending power. Brands that treat this cohort as a single contradictory monolith will lose; those that design for both the thrill of newness and the ethics of longevity will win.

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**Sources:** McKinsey State of Fashion 2026 • ThredUp Resale Report 2026 • Springer Nature Fashion & Textiles (Dec 2025) • Statista • PwC Gen Z Consumer Trends • Sheffield Hallam University • Rawshot.ai analysis • The Sustainable Agency 2026

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