

Greenwashing in Fast Fashion

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i09.042 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i09.042>

Received: 10 September 2025 / Accepted: 26 September 2025 / Published: 30 September 2025

Research Question: How does greenwashing in fast fashion marketing impact consumer awareness of genuine sustainable practices?

Introduction:

In 2022, the fast fashion industry was estimated to generate over 92 million tons of textile waste, enough to fill more than 1,200 Olympic-sized swimming pools, yet many of these same companies market themselves as “sustainable” (Niinimäki et al.). This paradox may reflect the rising problem of greenwashing, the practice of misleading consumers about a company’s environmental practices or the sustainability of its products. In the fast fashion industry, greenwashing often takes the form of vague buzzwords, like “eco-friendly,” “conscious,” or “green,” which are used in their marketing campaigns without providing any credible evidence or third-party certification that they are following any sustainable protocol. Such tactics don’t just deceive the consumers but also exploit their increasing desire to make more environmentally responsible choices, creating the illusion about ethical consumption while continuing harmful practices behind the scenes of purchasing (Delmas and Burbano). Furthermore, fast fashion is a relatively recent phenomenon, gaining its popularity in the late twentieth century as globalisation, outsourcing, and the sudden rise of consumer culture has enabled brands like Zara, H&M, and later Shein to produce low-cost, trend-driven clothing at unprecedented speed (Joy et al.). While this model has revolutionized access to more affordable style, it also has led to fueled overproduction, heaps of waste, and exploitative labour systems. In the early 2000s, as public awareness of climate change and sustainability unexpectedly grew, these same brands introduced “sustainable collections” and took environmental pledges. However, critics argued that many of these initiatives were more about the branding than making a real tangible difference, allowing the fast fashion companies to profit from this sustainability discourse without actually adhering and addressing the structural industrial problems. (McNeill and Moore). However, this growth has brought a significant environmental and ethical cost into the industry and various companies.

In response to the mounting criticism, many fashion brands have started to market their products

as “sustainable” or “eco-friendly”. While this may be a positive step in the direction of sustainability, it has also led to a humongous and dramatic rise in greenwashing. Greenwashing in fast fashion is not only about misleading their consumers but also diminishing their trust in the certifications about sustainability and their genuine input towards global climate goals. For example, vague or false claims create confusion that makes it harder for consumers to distinguish between the brands genuinely committed to sustainable practices and the others just using it as a head first marketing strategy. As the fashion industry produces nearly 10 percent of global carbon emissions alongside massive water use and waste, distinguishing genuine sustainability from performative marketing is critical (David Suzuki Foundation). This paper examines how greenwashing shapes consumer awareness and explores how fast fashion marketing influences perceptions and behaviors in India, a rapidly growing market.

Methodology

To assess consumer awareness and perceptions of greenwashing in the fast fashion industry thoroughly, a structured survey was designed and distributed through digital platforms like Google Forms, Instagram, WhatsApp, and email. The questionnaire collected mostly demographic data (age, gender, location, and education level) as well as their personal insights and opinions into participants' perceptions of what is sustainability in fashion. It included a mix of close and open-ended questions to strike a balance between quantitative and qualitative data. The participants were asked to self-assess their familiarity with sustainable fashion brands they believed to be genuinely sustainable and reflect on the frequency with which they encountered environmental messaging in the fashion market.

The survey yielded 114 valid responses, with participants age ranging from 13 to 65+ years. Of these, 7.9% were aged 18-34, 95.1% were between 35-50, and 7% were 17 or younger.

Additionally, 66.7% identified as female, 33.3% as male. The majority of responses came from India (82%) while 18% were from international participants, allowing for a meaningful comparative analysis across the globe.

The key focus of this analysis was to interpret the brand awareness, the extent to which the participants trusted the sustainability claims made by brands, and their ability to differentiate between the genuine initiatives and greenwashing tactics. This approach offered insights into how demographic factors shape consumer knowledge and perceptions of misleading marketing.

In addition to primary data, this research incorporated lots of secondary sources, including multiple academic studies and industry reports on fast fashion's environmental impact and consumer psychology. Prior research helped highlight that many consumers struggle to differentiate and recognise greenwashing, often accepting vague claims such as “eco-friendly”

(Delmas and Burbano, 66). Many reports also indicated that fast fashion brands have started to increasingly use sustainability as a marketing tool without incorporating any meaningful operational changes (European Environment Agency). Combining these secondary findings with the survey results strengthens the overall analysis.

Literature Review

The following sections are going to evaluate the critical dimensions of the term and idea of greenwashing in fast fashion, drawing from scholarly work, investigative journalism, and day-to-day developments to provide a comprehensive and updated perspective.

1. Greenwashing tactics:

Greenwashing misleads consumers by frequently employs a lot of ambiguous language, self-certifications, and a high amount of selective transparency. A study in Journal of Cleaner Production illustrates how a lot of the known brands highlight minimal eco-friendly features into their marketing campaigns while obscuring broader environmental harm (Alizadeh et al.). For example, they tend to overuse or underuse slogans like “eco-friendly fabric” or “sustainable collection”, these slogans are often not able to accurately convey the real emphasis and lack clear definitions or evidence in their message to the consumers. Furthermore, notably H&Ms “Conscious collection” that was first hyped when introduced as a move towards sustainability. However, this particular collection was flagged by Norway’s Consumer Authority for failing to specify what they mean and how they qualify as sustainable (Whiting). These tactics enable many brands, not just H&M, to appear very environmentally responsible and considerate without implementing any substantive changes to their production system.

2. Psychological and Cultural Impacts

The media plays a vital role by helping brands to normalize greenwashing. Damian Carrington from The Guardian highlights how influencers often tend to promote sustainability while parading fast fashion endorsements, and cultivating to a surface-level of eco-culture that mainly favours the aesthetic over substance (Carrington). This dynamic fuels performative environmentalism, where ethicalism is usually staged rather than sincerely pursued or openly discussed.

3. Consumer Perceptions and Behavioural effects

Greenwashing is able to produce a lot of skepticism in the industry that discourages even the willing eco-consumers. As Montgomery points out, heightened awareness of misleading marketing can eventually erode the trust that has been established between a brand and its

customers, reducing their engagement with the genuinely sustainable brands (Montgomery). This trust deficit may threaten the growth of the industry as well as the long-term sustainability efforts and limits consumer agency.

4. Legal and Systemic Developments

Recent regulatory interventions have demonstrated a growing institutional pushback. The EU's upcoming Green Claims Directive requires environmental claims to be specific, scientifically verified, and independently audited as they seem to be addressing the 25% of misleading claims that have been traced towards fashion (Vogue Business, EU Directive). In a recent striking case, Italy's antitrust authority fined Shein (a globally well-known fast fashion retailer) €1 Million in August 2025 for deceptive environmental claims, significantly regarding its "evoluShein" collection and the greenhouse gas targets that has contradicted the report that shows that the emission increases (Reuters, AGCM Fine). Similarly, the UK's Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) flagged that up to 60% of claims from fast-fashion giants like ASOS, H&M, and Zara were unsubstantiated (Parker Aranha). These legal actions underscore the legal pressure that falls on all greenwashing practices.

5. Broader Academic and Ethical Perspectives

Most scholars are calling for some robust frameworks to tackle the evolution of greenwashing strategies. Feghali emphasizes the need to understand greenwashing across communication phases and strengthen systemic checks (Feghali). Additionally, Persakis was able to advocate by applying bibliometric analysis to build a comprehensive mapping of the broader aspects of greenwashing research, which can inform more effective policy responses specifically in the future (Persakis).

Need for Research

Despite the increased attention on sustainability, there remains a significant gap in actually understanding how effectively and accurately consumers can identify greenwashing. While many studies have focused on western markets, very few have examined how greenwashing influences consumer awareness in South Asia, one of the fastest growing markets where fast fashion brands are increasingly targeting a growing middle class. This research addresses this gap by analysing data from Indian as well as Western consumers. Additionally, the need for this research is amplified by the conflicting role of social media. While social media is helpful in educating consumers, it is also a bracket for greenwashing via influencer marketing (The Guardian; Time). As there aren't many ways for consumers to follow sustainable definitions, they often rely on brand messaging, which may not be truthful. Investigating this dissonance helps advocate for greater transparency in the fashion industry and also empowers consumers to make informed

decisions while choosing where to shop.

Findings and Visual Representation

The close and open-ended survey conducted results reveal both encouraging awareness and misconceptions about sustainable fashion. A majority of respondents had described themselves as either “somewhat familiar” or “very familiar” with the concept of sustainability in fashion, mainly those over 45 years of age and with higher educational backgrounds. However, this familiarity often remained at the surface-level; as many participants had misidentified fast fashion and luxury brands such as Zara, H&M, Gucci, and Burberry as sustainable, despite these brands being repeatedly criticized for engaging in greenwashing. By contrast, relatively fewer respondents had identified the brands that were authentically sustainable such as No Nasties, Nicobar, Fab India, and Anokhi, by reflecting a disconnect between self-perceived awareness, and their objective recognition of the brands even if they were globally known or not.

However, generational differences seemed to stand out. As the younger respondents (13-25) were more skeptical about the fact that fast fashion brands could never truly be sustainable. While, the older respondents were acknowledging the environmental impact of fashion as they tended to view more mainstream brands initiatives (like "Conscious" lines) as positive steps. This indicates how Gen Z is able to dig deeper and question the corporate narratives, whereas the older consumers are more receptive to the marketing claims.

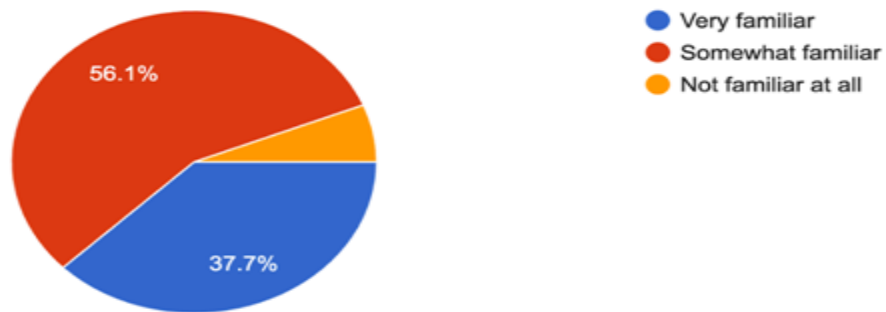
Despite the rise in awareness, consumer behaviour had remained inconsistent. A larger portion of the survey participants admitted to shopping frequently or occasionally at fast fashion retailers, demonstrating a gap between values and actions. However, as many had recognized sustainability issues but still prioritized price, accessibility of the product, and style when making their purchases with those brands. When questioned about the impact of greenwashing, a significant number of participants shared that it reduced their trust in brands. Yet, some of the respondents had also acknowledged that even if the campaigns were misleading they still created and brought attention to the visibility of sustainability, thus, increasing its chances as a topic of discussion and consumer perception.

The survey also explored whether sustainability perception had factored into purchasing decisions. The responses for this question were very varied; 15.8% of participants had ranked it as “extremely important,” especially those in international or high eco-aware demographics, while 72.8% of the respondents had considered it “somewhat important” or even “not important at all” for 11.4%. This factors into the deception of affordability and aesthetics being more stronger motivators than the power of sustainability. When they were also asked about how the fashion industry could possibly improve their production methods, the recurring suggestions

included; transparency in the supply chains, ethical material sourcing, waste reduction, long product life cycles, and consumer education programs about the product or the sustainability of the product or how it may not be harming the environment.

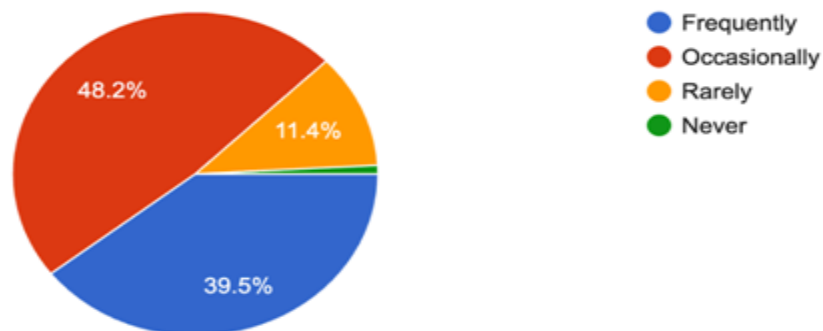
How familiar are you with the concept of "sustainable fashion"?

114 responses



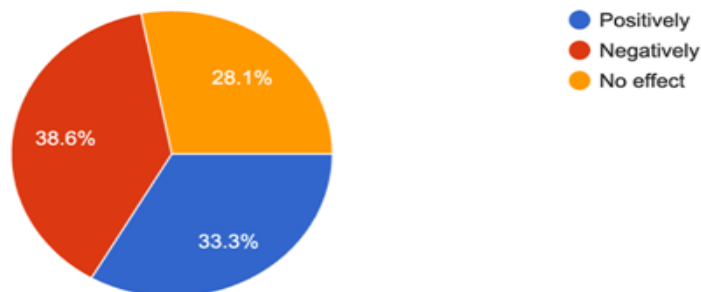
How often do you shop from fast fashion brands?

114 responses



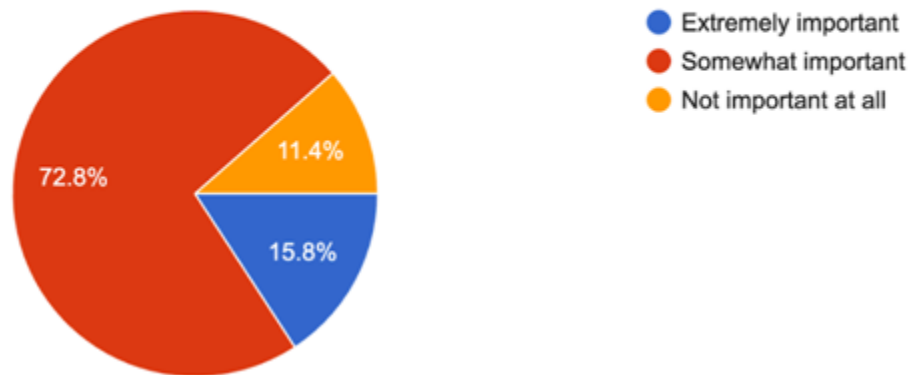
How does greenwashing affect your perception of a brand's genuine sustainability efforts? (Greenwashing is misleading or deceptive ...t or fashion brand to be environmentally friendly).

114 responses



How important are a brand's sustainability practices in your purchasing decisions?

114 responses

**Conclusion**

The research shows that while the awareness of sustainability in fashion is growing, it is still shaped and often misled by the tactics of greenwashing. The survey's findings revealed that many participants who believed they understood sustainable fashion often identified fast fashion brands as sustainable, which shows how sometimes potentially marketing can overpower factual understanding. Differences also appeared across age groups, with younger consumers tending to be more critical and skeptical while older respondents are more likely to accept and know the basic and generic claims made by brands for their sustainability collections. At the same time, they also look at the factors of time, convenience, price, and style that tend to remain as a stronger force towards their purchasing decisions rather than focusing on the sustainability aspect.

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