The Phenomenon of Greenwashing In The Fashion Industry: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract The fashion industry has one of the highest environmental, economic, and social impacts in the world. In recent times, awareness of sustainability issues has certainly increased, with companies making a real effort to reduce their impact. On the other hand, consumer awareness has also increased, with companies seeing sustainability as an element of competitive advantage. However, to achieve these advantages some companies taint themselves with the phenomenon of greenwashing, creating a disparity between the sustainability commitments actually made and those advertised. This paper aims to analyse the phenomenon of greenwashing in the fashion industry at a literature level with the objective of creating a conceptual framework to analyse and recognise elements of greenwashing in the companies studied.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Fashion industry, Environmental Sustainability, Framework, SPAR-4-SLR

1. Introduction

The fashion industry has a staggering economic and environmental impact: it is a $2.4 trillion industry that employs 300 million people worldwide, responsible for 20% of the world's wastewater, losses of $100 billion due to underutilization and lack of recycling, and for 9% of annual microplastic leakage into the ocean (Adamkiewicz J., 2022).

According to Global Fashion Agenda 2020 research, the equivalent of a truckload of clothes is added to landfills every second due to the disposal of many unsold garments, such as H&M, which has an unsold inventory of roughly 40%. (Wren B., 2022).

The fashion industry's output includes almost 92 million tons of finished goods and 79 billion litres of water consumed each year (Niinimäki K., et al., 2020).

In terms of annual carbon emissions from the fashion industry's product life cycle, this can be compared to those of the EU's 28 member countries combined - 3,3 vs 3,5 million tons. The emissions of Greenhouse gases (GHGs) from textile production exceed those of international aviation and maritime transportation combined (Beltramo R., 2020).

Taking into account the significant use of natural resources through extraction, the pesticide emissions that are emitted from cotton farms, the ingestion of microplastics, and the sparging of polyethylene fibre, it may become clear that this industry requires an effective and determined shift in direction.

Numerous businesses are improving their operations to become more responsible and sustainable. The topic is more relevant than ever on a global scale, and the industry seems to be getting more and more attention. Consumer awareness is rising, and regulations placed across the entire supply chain have prompted businesses to focus more on sustainability than in the past. Being sustainable is increasingly recognised as a virtue that benefits a company's reputation and competitive advantages. At times, however, obtaining these benefits without making the necessary efforts to execute sustainable initiatives is a practice adopted by certain businesses.

When an organisation engages in public environmental initiatives without the transparency or commitment necessary to back up its claims, it is called greenwashing. (Wren B., 2022).

The term "greenwashing" refers to the interplay between symbolic and real actions, or, more specifically, between initiatives that are consistent with sustainability approaches but have no discernible impact and those that instead provide a clear and tangible benefit. In writing, "greenwashing" is only associated with symbolic actions that emphasize insignificant issues, divert attention from the company's unsustainable business practices, or even publish previously unreported actions (Siano F., 2017), with the goal of enhancing and maintaining the brand's reputation and outstanding results in the eyes of stakeholders.

An example of greenwashing from the past is the H&M case from 2013 reported by (Wren B., 2022). The company adopted a number of initiatives and claimed that its new products were more "eco-compatible," but these claims were later found to be unsupported by actual actions, and the Norwegian Consumer Agency indicated that the company's claims about its products' environmental credentials were false and illegal.

Due to rising customer demand for ecologically friendly products, businesses have used greenwashing more frequently in recent years. The number of items making green claims has surged by 79% in the past two years, but 98% of these products are engaging in greenwashing, according to TerraChoice Environmental Marketing. Between 2006 and 2009, green advertising in prominent publications grew from 3.5% to 10%; it is likely considerably greater today, as the number of items with questionable green claims is anticipated to more than double in the next few years (Dahl R., 2010).

It is possible to classify the dangers of greenwashing into two main categories according to their impact: social consequences and environmental consequences.

Social consequences can be understood as the negative effects on people's perceived image of a company (Chen Y.), but also as negative effects on the overall performance of organizations as well as on corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Dejong M., 2019),

From an environmental point of view, greenwashing negatively affects the ecological purchasing behaviour of consumers, who are unaware of it. Brands that greenwash not only slow down the sustainability movement, but also harm themselves. Overemphasizing a product's sustainability credentials with misleading wording can lead to criticism that undermines the brand's image, without considering that the benefits that sustainability brings in terms of, for example, raw material savings, optimisation of business processes and consumption are also lost.

If the information on ecological declarations turns out to be misleading, it means that companies can induce virtuous consumers to become an unwitting part of the problem.

Ultimately, greenwashing can be said to hinder the progress needed to see global sustainability goals achieved.

In this context, the present work aims to propose a literature review for academics and policymakers who work on this topic, setting a framework to analyse firms under the lens of greenwashing. The paper will also collect and define strategies against the greenwashing phenomenon and propose improvements, to support firms in their path towards sustainability by avoiding greenwashing.

2. Methodology

To define a contextual framework to be used as a guide to analyse firms' realities under the lens of greenwashing, the first step was to carry out a systematic literature review on the topic.

This step allowed us to analyse the contents of the articles, searching for two main aspects.

First of all, by reading the papers, it was possible to pick and isolate those behaviours and conducts from firms that the authors pointed out as guilty of greenwashing.

In addition, the text search was also carried out to find companies explicitly mentioned in the documents, so that their websites could be analysed in terms of their sustainability statements. To conduct the systematic literature review in the research domain of "greenwashing in the fashion industry", the approach used is based on the steps proposed by the Scientific Procedures and Rationales for Systematic Literature Reviews – SPAR-4-SLR (Paul J., 2021).

It is a three-step process: Assembling, Arranging, and Assessing.

Assembling is composed of two sub-phases: Identification, where the documents to be reviewed are identified in this sub-phase, and Acquisition, where the first search for these documents is carried out on the selected databases.

Identification includes the Research Domain in the spectrum of greenwashing topics related to the Fashion Industry, explored in depth in the scientific literature by answering the Research Questions guiding the investigation.

The Arranging phase includes the Organizing and Purification subphases, where a screening of the results is conducted.

Finally, the Assessing phase, consisting of Evaluation and Reporting as sub-phases, evaluates the sources and information obtained and reports the results.

3. Results

First of all, the analysis of the SLR led to a total amount of 49 results after the Assembling phase, where only the keywords were searched on Scopus in the Research Domain of greenwashing in the fashion industry.

The Arranging phase cut this number almost in half with 24 results found and further analysed. Particularly, applying the Organizational Codes to filter the results, the number of sources excluded because of language, document type, and source type dropped to a total of 31. Moreover, analysing the title and abstract of the remaining sources, it appears that 24 were actually on the topic of the research domain, while the others only mentioned the keyword searched but did not actually analysed the topic. In Table 1, the results of the SLR are reported, with the indication of the presence of recognized symptoms of greenwashing explained in the paper.

Table 1. SLR results

Source	Symptoms
(Dobos E., et al., 2023)	Yes
(Laudien S.M., et al., 2023)	No
(Velasco-Molpeceres A., et al., 2023)	No
(Adamkiewicz J., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Apaolaza V., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Brydges T., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Eppinger E., 2022)	Yes
(Liedong T.A., et al., 2022)	No
(Lu X., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Marrucci L., et al., 2022)	No
(Reck R., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Sailor A., et al., 2022)	Yes

(Wu W., et al., 2022)	No
(Munir S., et al., 2022)	Yes
(Bingaman J., et al., 2022)	No
(Gonçalves A., et al., 2021)	No
(Rausch T.M., et al., 2021)	No
(Ferrero-Ferrero I., et al., 2020)	No
(Gacek J., 2020)	Yes
(Kim Y., et al., 2020)	Yes
(Mohmed A., et al., 2020)	Yes
(Henninger C.E., et al., 2016)	No
(Hansen E.G., et al., 2011)	No
(Vial V., 2008)	Yes

In terms of content analysis, it emerged that 13 of the results contained elements that helped identify greenwashing symptoms.

The total number of symptoms collected was 28, with some overlapping results due to the citation of the same papers between them.

These elements were discussed among the authors in order to relate each of them to a common framework.

It emerged that the main areas individuated were five, and these are the five symptoms of greenwashing that constitute the proposed conceptual framework (Table 2**Error! Reference source not found.**).

Table 2. Greenwashing conceptual framework

Symptom	Description
OVERSELLING	To say things to exaggerate the importance of actions done
VAGUENESS	To say vague things to evoke greens
IRRELEVANCE	To say things that are obviously already in the law or not relevant to the scope
CONCEALING	To say things that highlight the best aspects and hide the worst ones
MISLEADING	To say things that are misleading, false, or cannot be proven

As for the companies, 6 sources mentioned firms regarding greenwashing. These firms were the following: Nanushka, YosoLOVEoamor, Lifegist, Ecoalf, Alohas, Ecoology, H&M, Canada goose, Zara andUniqlo.

All of them have a dedicated sustainability section and only four of them do not share a sustainability report.

Not all of them were accused of greenwashing. In fact, some were cited because they are considered positive cases of sustainability in the fashion industry or were used as a case study to analyse the phenomenon.

4. Conclusions

Through this work, we were able to define a framework useful in defining and recognising symptoms of greenwashing when studying a company.

The results from the literature show that misleading, concealing, and vaguen actions are prevalent.

Knowing how to recognise such actions also enables them to be avoided, both from the point of view of companies, with the aim of raising their awareness of concrete actions in terms of sustainability, and from the point of view of consumers, who can avoid purchasing garments from companies that engage in greenwashing.

With this work, we want to provide policymakers and academics with a collection of scientific articles on the topic as well as a useful framework for studying the problem.

Furthermore, this work will be used in the analysis of the Marche Region, Italy, as it is a region that is highly specialised in the fashion industry.

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