

## Consumer Opinions On Fashion Greenwashing: Insights From Reddit Discussions

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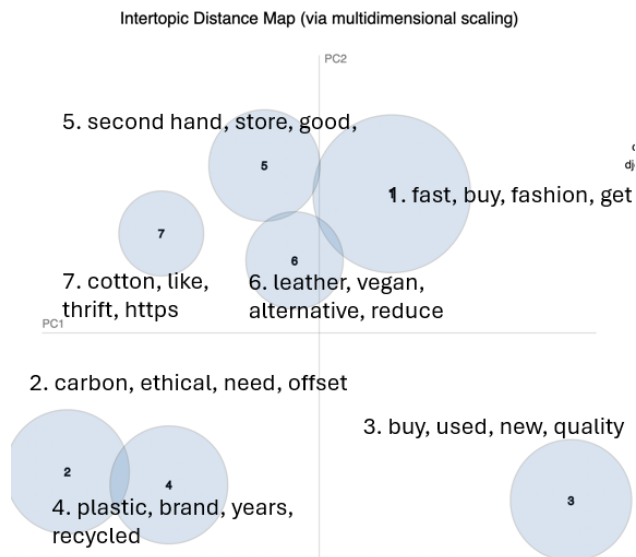
Keywords: Fashion Greenwashing, Consumer Opinion, Cognitive Dissonance, Social Media

“Greenwashing” is a term that describes the phenomenon of companies misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of their products or their commitment to sustainability to increase profit (Slater, 2019; Watson, 2016). Recently, the fashion industry has been chosen as one of greenwashing’s worst offenders (Webb, 2021). Fashion brands benefit from greenwashing by charging a premium for “Sustainable” products. In addition, the global fashion industry is growing tremendously (Pinnock, 2021), producing over 100 billion tons of clothing yearly, approximately twenty percent of which goes unsold (Thomas, 2019). Greenwashing has harmful consequences for both consumers and the environment. Socially conscious consumers can be manipulated by fashion brands’ greenwashing. There are several reasons the fashion industry is vulnerable to greenwashing. One is the increase in sustainability awareness among the Millennial and Gen Z generations. They are willing to pay more for sustainable products, especially fashion items. The others include the fashion industry’s complex supply chain and lack of regulations (West, 2023). Recently, awareness of greenwashing has increased, and it has been discussed among consumers more frequently. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the current consumers’ opinions regarding greenwashing in fashion brands.

The cognitive dissonance theory originally developed by Festinger (1957) is utilized in this study as a theoretical framework. According to this theory, when individuals initially accept green claims from fashion companies and later encounter information that contradicts these claims, they experience cognitive dissonance, leading to an internal conflict. To alleviate this discomfort and resolve the dissonance, individuals may adopt various strategies, for example, they might change their purchasing decisions, justify their previous choices, or alter their perception of the brand’s sustainability claims. The cognitive dissonance theory has been utilized to investigate the effects of various degrees of greenwashing on fashion brands’ reputation (De Jong et al, 2020). In this study, the cognitive dissonance theory serves as a framework to interpret how consumers psychologically manage the inconsistencies between their sustainability values and the greenwashing actions of fashion brands.

In this study, Reddit was chosen as the data source due to its extensive user base, which engages in detailed discussions on fashion greenwashing. To get the relevant data, we used the search term “fashion greenwashing” to identify pertinent posts and comments on Reddit platform. Only posts that have a minimum of five comments were considered for analysis to ensure a sufficient depth of discussion. Overall, 446 comments from 12 distinct posts were collected using Python on Feb 28, 2024. The widely adopted topic modeling method, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithms (Blein et al., 2023), were utilized to extract the topics from these comments. Given the relatively modest size of the dataset, it was feasible to manually review the content of the textual data. This dual-method approach allowed for a thorough

examination of the data, where the topics and sentiments identified through the LDA analysis were cross-verified and enriched by manual review.



Three themes are categorized from the manual review analysis. The first theme concerns **the phenomenon of fashion greenwashing**. Consumers are increasingly perceptive of greenwashing tactics employed by fashion brands. For instance, certain brands state to reduce carbon footprint yet contribute to waste by destroying old stock. Additionally, some companies claim to utilize natural materials like bamboo, yet they omit details about the chemicals used in softening the rayon fibers. A more discerning segment of consumers raises further concerns, such as the microfiber pollution from recycled polyester and the substantial water consumption required for organic cotton cultivation. This

indicates that online consumers are becoming well-informed and can identify various greenwashing strategies deployed by businesses. The second is **consumer empowerment in fashion sustainability**. Consumers share their thoughts about what they could do to support fashion sustainability. A prevailing sentiment is the importance of consuming less. They also discuss alternative shopping practices such as purchasing second-hand items, frequenting thrift stores, and selecting durable materials. Furthermore, consumers highlight the role of reputable third-party organizations, such as Goodonyou, B-corp, etc., in guiding sustainable choices. There is a general agreement that being a perfect consumer is not possible, but consumers can still make a big difference by trying to be more sustainable. The conversations show a growing awareness and proactive stance among consumers towards fashion sustainability. The third theme is **criticism of greenwashing marketing practices**. Many consumers express distrust in the marketing claims in sustainability in fast fashion companies. For example, customers evaluated an H&M advertisement, “*Earth tones unfortunately came to symbolize a virtue of minimalist, nature-friendly, and low-effort aesthetic — doesn’t matter if it’s still an integral part of fast fashion.*” Another comment mentioned “*They are selling our concerns, not their outputs.*” These comments reflect the deep skepticism consumers hold towards the marketing strategies of fast fashion companies, especially regarding their sustainability claims.

The topics extracted by the LDA algorithms are displayed in the plot, where each topic is represented by a bubble with four dominant keywords. The similar size and even distribution of these bubbles, along with the lack of overlap, indicate that the LDA algorithm has successfully identified distinct and well-defined topics within the data. Among these topics, Topics 2 and 4 align with the first theme, highlight consumer awareness of green initiatives like carbon offsetting, alongside skepticism reflected in their comments. For example, “*Carbon offsets are tax deductible. Great for PR.*” Topics 3, 5, 6, and 7 fall into the second theme. Besides buying second-hand and buying used, consumers also choose vegan leather as alternatives, indicating a

broader consumer interest in alternative, more sustainable materials, and practices. Topic 1 is categorized into the third theme. Consumers link greenwashing to fast fashion and express skepticism towards the marketing strategies employed by fast fashion brands.

By applying cognitive dissonance theory, this study utilized manual review and LDA text-mining to extract topics and themes from Reddit data, providing a deep understanding of consumer perceptions of fashion greenwashing. The manual review covers the major themes, and the text-mining methods adds more details for the themes. The findings indicate that conscious consumers are well informed and are aware of the greenwashing phenomenon. They recognize the impracticality of being perfect in their purchasing choices, yet they seek out information for third-party sources and strive to make informed decisions. Fashion practitioners should provide authentic and transparent information, including both merits and demerits of their sustainability practices, rather than only showcasing the positives. Future study will include more data, such as comments on social media, to further explore consumers' response to brands' greenwashing.

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