

FIBRE FANTASIES

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF WELLNESS CLAIMS IN TEXTILE MARKETING

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Abstract

With an increase in consumer demand for health and lifestyle products, some fashion and textile apparel brands are referencing problematic sources or misinterpreting scientific claims on the health benefits of textile fibres to sell wellness products in a saturated market. This paper unpacks the textile fibre wellness phenomenon under ethical consumption greenwashing frameworks, specifically referencing the mystified storytelling tactic adapted by wellness brands from luxury brand marketing strategies. Through case studies of linen and bamboo from online clothing brands, it examines spiritual greenwashing practices alongside technical and scientific claims about fibre frequencies and anti-microbial properties. The aim is to highlight the conflicting issues at play in wellness textile marketing and the need for more textile expertise, stronger guidelines and legislation to assist brands and consumers to navigate this complex terrain in an ethical manner.

Keywords: *Wellness textiles, Ethical Consumption, Fibre Marketing, Spiritual Greenwashing, Mystified Storytelling*

INTRODUCTION

There are many factors which contribute to the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of scientific properties of textiles and the ethical sourcing and production of fibres. The manufacturing of fibre, yarn and fabric, particularly for technical sportswear and online wellness clothing brands, is based in Global South countries such as China, India, Turkey and Bangladesh, while garment design often takes place in the Global North, specifically in Australia, North America or Europe. With thousands of kilometres in between design and manufacturing there is potential for disparities in communication and understanding to occur, even more so if a language barrier is involved. Historically, fibres and textiles have been critically

linked to the success and flourishing of human beings, whether constructed to procure food, provide shelter, or make clothing. Textiles have become so commonplace to our existence that we have perhaps forgotten that textiles are complex materials. Fibres are harvested and carded or extracted and extruded, typically spun into yarns and increasingly blended. Yarns are then looped or interlaced, typically classed by structure: either woven, knitted or non-woven. Modern textile materials include composites, films, and exhibit smart and active capabilities. Textile products are simultaneously both ancient, imbued with cultural importance; and innovative, engineered with finishes to heal wounds or track health data

as examples. Now more than ever we are seeing the flow on effect of this complexity in instances of textile fibre and wellness claims when self-proclaimed experts are quoted out of context, or scientific claims are misinterpreted by brands. Concurrently, there is a growing movement across the globe to tighten restrictions on greenwashing claims (European Commission, 2023; Parliament of Australia, 2023). Although many countries already have existing legislation in place to protect consumers from false and misleading claims, such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, the Consumer Guarantees Act in New Zealand, and the Federal Trade Commission in the United States, such laws are infrequently enforced. A notable exception is the 2021 case involving the Australian activewear brand Lorna Jane. The brand was fined \$5 million AUD for false claims about its LJ Shield Activewear, which purportedly ‘eliminated,’ ‘stopped the spread,’ and ‘protected wearers against viruses including COVID-19’ (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2021). While this case serves as a cautionary tale for wellness brands to tread carefully with product claims, regulatory bodies appear ill-equipped to address the broader scope of misleading claims at the intersection of wellness, fashion, and textiles. There is also a rising demand for specialised textile products in the health and lifestyle wellness market. The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness as the ‘active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health’ (Global Wellness Institute, n.d. defining wellness section, para. 1). The wellness industry’s exclusive commodities—those marketed as unique or special, prescribe alternative, many times unregulated and privatised solutions to health and lifestyle concerns. These alternatives are often spiritual in nature, and many respond to both ethical consumption patterns and greenwashing marketing tactics. This paper examines the misconstrued scientific claims made by online wellness clothing brands, specifically in relation to the fibre frequencies and anti-microbial capabilities of linen and bamboo. This paper is structured in two parts: First, we provide an overview of the wellness industry and the relevant literature on ethical consumption and fibre and textile greenwashing. Second, we discuss the linen and bamboo case studies under the key concept of ‘mystified storytelling’ in relation to the fibre’s technical properties, traditional

uses, analysis of marketing claims in contrast to scientific evidence. The insights gathered at the intersection of wellness and luxury marketing, and textile product claims, advances the scholarship on greenwashing.

OVERVIEW OF THE WELLNESS INDUSTRY, ETHICAL CONSUMPTION AND GREENWASHING

The wellness industry functions and thrives by emulating fashion and luxury marketing strategies. Many of its products target affluent consumers with environmental, social and ethical concerns. This rising industry represented a global worth of USD 5.6 trillion in 2022 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023), making it more than three times larger than the 2022, USD 1.48 trillion global pharmaceutical industry (Statista, 2024). Its economic and cultural significance is most evident on social media, due to the rise of fashion, health and lifestyle influencers and self-branding strategies that capitalise on personal narratives and perceived authenticity tactics (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2019). The wellness industry encompasses eleven sectors including: personal care and beauty; healthy eating, nutrition, and weight loss; physical activity; wellness tourism; public health, prevention and personalised medicine; traditional and complementary medicine; wellness real estate; mental wellness; spas; workplace wellness; thermal/mineral springs (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). Wellness products capitalise and commodify the universal pursuit of wellbeing through aspirational and often expensive products and experiences. Many of these wellness products and garments are found engaging in practices of greenwashing and miscommunication of health and spiritual claims as ethical consumption marketing strategies. Ethical consumption is a broad range of consumptive tendencies in the wellness industry encompassing attributes of social justice, environmental concerns, and personal well-being (Lewis & Potter 2011). Ethical consumption is also understood as a form of micropolitical practices (Littler, 2009). It aligns with the aestheticization and politicization of everyday life (Featherstone, 2007), where consumer choices reflect moral values and lifestyle aesthetics. Yet simultaneously, the ethical or conscious consumer is forced to navigate a crowded and oftentimes confusing and paradoxical consumptive information landscape. This is due to entangled

ethical, spiritual and traditional luxury attributes. This pattern of consumption mobilizes cultural and moral capital, often employing luxury branding strategies such as mystified storytelling to appeal to consumers seeking to express their ethical stance through purchases. Mystified storytelling is a branding concept derived from luxury brand management (Kapferer & Bastien 2012) theory and relates to luxury brands use of elite advertising (Luna Mora & Berry, 2022; Saviolo & Corbellini, 2009), or capitalisation on the mythological and dream-like aspects of the brand rather than the technical or performance attributes of the products. This branding strategy assists wellness brands in creating legitimacy and authenticity by blurring the lines between textile technical performance, health attributes, environmental impact, and personal well-being. For example, wellness narratives are often expressed through personal stories of triumph over adversity. Claims made by wellness influencers or 'lifestyle gurus' (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 394) often give preference to anecdotal observations of consumption, often expensive and sophisticated products and ingredients. Many of these commodities operate at a premium market price due to the added, specialised attributes often blurring the lines between environmental, social and spiritual concerns rather than supporting the premium price through scientific evidence. Some examples of ethical consumption attributes include terms such as: local, organic, fair-trade, zero-waste, non-toxic, vegan and cruelty free; blending or sometimes intersecting with traditional luxury attributes such as high quality, uniqueness, rare materials, mystified techniques, hand-crafted, limited, personalised and exclusive.

The broad and often confusing range of spiritual, luxury and sustainable attributes marketed through wellness products and the clothing brands discussed in this paper can also be understood as a form of greenwashing. Greenwashing, similar to ethical consumption is a concept that can take multiple forms and has been examined through different disciplines (Nemes et al., 2022), it is also broadly recognised as a deceptive environmental communication technique (Mousavi et al., 2024) which fashion and textiles businesses engage with to achieve legitimacy (Berthelot et al., 2003) and to express the brand's commitment to sustainability (Mousavi et al., 2024). Greenwashing in fashion and textiles presents a serious challenge, as brands often misrepresent their environmental efforts

and hinder actual progress towards sustainability (Mousavi et al., 2024). The literature on textile greenwashing often focuses on misleading claims and information in lifecycle assessment, lifecycle cost and eco-labelling (Mousavi et al., 2024). However, there is little to no literature on greenwashing strategies from a spiritual or wellness perspective, especially at the intersection of wellness fashion and textile brands and luxury. As such, this paper will discuss practices of spiritual greenwashing in the marketing strategies of wellness and fashion textiles.

The wellness industry's growth and convergence with ethical consumption, practices of spiritual greenwashing and luxury's mystified storytelling evidences the intersection of hyper individualism, the rise of miscommunication through social media, and new signifiers of economic and social class. Well-being is now understood as wealth and affluence rather than happiness and satisfaction. Along with the incorporation of sustainable, ethical, environmental, and spiritual concerns, the wellness industry drives new moral values of contemporary consumer culture in the context of the experience and transformation economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

WELLNESS AND LIFESTYLE TEXTILES

Wellness advocates often reject conventional western paradigms, favouring personal experience, independent research, and conclusions derived from diverse sources. Historically, this scepticism has been directed towards western medicine, pharmaceutical industries, and processed food systems (Baker & Rojek, 2020). More recently, this rejection has expanded to include claims made by brands regarding the health benefits of textile fibres. The wellness industry, characterised by its largely unregulated nature, allows for significant experimentation and interpretation. Dunn (2023) describes wellness branding as:

'more than just a product or service—it's a lifestyle. A strong wellness brand captures the essence of holistic health and well-being and communicates it to customers in a clear and authentic way. It communicates to your customers who you are, what you do, and why you do it' (para. 7). Wellness branding merges luxury marketing strategies, lifestyle aspirations, and personal narratives with holistic well-being concepts to promote ethical consumption. While this approach effectively aligns

brand identity with consumer values, it frequently lacks rigorous scientific validation regarding the actual composition and properties of the textiles being marketed. The functionality and health benefits of many technical textile products—such as firefighter protective clothing, seatbelts, life jackets, and stab-resistant vests—are well-documented through controlled scientific testing. These textiles are engineered to perform specific safety-related functions and tested to ensure they perform as designed. In contrast, some wellness brands market their products as having health benefits based solely on the properties of the fibres used, without conducting the necessary scientific testing to substantiate these claims. While textile fibres possess measurable properties that can be enhanced through processes like spinning, weaving, and finishing, textile science recognises that fabric properties are influenced by more than just fibre type (Van Amber, 2013). Nonetheless, marketing in the consumer wellness sector often persists in attributing performance claims to fibre characteristics alone.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses textual analysis to examine two wellness claims made by online clothing brands: the beneficial frequencies of bast fibres and the anti-microbial capabilities of bamboo. The two case studies were brought to the authors' attention through collegial, social, or familial circles. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis, this paper aims to highlight the existence and prevalence of such phenomena. A search engine-based sampling method was used to view and select textile wellness blog posts to unpack and discuss. Simple Google keyword searches revealed wellness brands often use snippets of existing sources that align with wellness ideas, without properly critiquing the origin or context. In some cases, brands conflate similar but scientifically distinct ideas. Wellness textile brand narratives often incorporate key elements of wellness marketing, such as aspirational lifestyle branding, holistic health, brand origin stories, and values. The selected textual analysis method allows for the identification of highly visible and potentially influential online cases. Key questions include:

- What fibre wellness claims are being made, and how do they demonstrate ethical consumption and mystified storytelling?
- What sources are cited to support fibre-related

claims, and how do these claims engage in spiritual greenwashing through misleading information?

CASE STUDY: LINEN-RELATED MARKETING NARRATIVES

Linen has become strongly associated with the wellness industry, as evidenced by its prevalence in lifestyle and leisure products marketed towards consumers seeking an organic or 'clean living' lifestyle. As fashion is heavily predicated on novelty, and its marketing logics are being emulated by wellness brands (Luna Mora et al., 2018), there is a pressure for brands, designers and manufacturers to constantly innovate and develop new and novel materials. However, linen is an ancient fibre, with the potential for material innovation possibly limited, leading brands to focus on marketing innovation instead.

The relationship between linen fibre frequencies and wellness lifestyle ideals has been trending on social media in 2024, most referencing a 2013 article by two Rabbis, Dr Yellen and Dr Yellen featured in a self-published quarterly online journal: Hebrews Today. The following excerpts illustrate how two online clothing brands market bast fibre products using these unverified frequency claims. The first example comes from a blog post from an 'ethically made linen clothing' brand, titled 'Good vibrations - the healing powers of linen': '...So why has mankind since time immemorial placed such value on linen? Why is it so special and why is it so often referred to as having healing or holy powers? In 2003, a Jewish doctor called Heidi Yellen ran a study on the healing frequencies of various fabrics and their effect on the human body... Linen and pure wool however both resonate at a tremendous 5000 hz - that's 50 times the natural frequency of the human body! Thus the healing and positive potential of these fibres on the body is exponential! Interestingly, God's warning not to mix the two fibres together is also proven by science. Heidi's study found that the energy field of wool flows in the opposite direction to the energy field of linen and thus the fields collapse and cancel each other out' (Manufacture De Lin, n.d. para.4). Here, the use of mystified storytelling can be identified with the reference to 'a time immemorial' linking longevity with material value and providing a historical and/or mythological reference as justification for perceived legitimacy of the studies on healing frequencies. Ethical consumption attributes and specialised language such as 'electromagnetic

can also be identified with the mix of technical field resonance of 5000hz' next to spiritual and religious claims such as 'God's warning not to mix the two fibres'. The lack of hierarchy of ideas and the convergence of value of religious and spiritual beliefs next to supposed scientific claims, health attributes, and self-transformation promises creates a paradoxical and confusing message to ethical consumers who are eager to know more about the concept of fibre frequencies and the potential health benefits they may bring.

To further highlight this paradoxical marketing strategy, an Australian online yoga brand has taken an alternate approach, this time referencing the testing equipment and measurements used to quantify textile frequencies, rather than religious references. The following excerpt is from a blog post titled 'The Frequency of clothing: what fabrics support your health?':

'A study by Dr Heidi Yellen suggests that the fabrics in our wardrobe influence our wellbeing in ways we never imagined. Grounded in bioenergetics, the study reveals that everything vibrates at its own unique frequency. Dr Yellen conducted her research with the Ag-Environ machine, a unique instrument that she used to measure the frequencies of fabrics. This digital machine was developed by a retired Texas A&M professor, Bob Graham. Initially designed to analyse the signature frequencies of agricultural commodities. Its application in Dr. Yellen's study offered a means to quantify the vibrational qualities of different fabrics in relation to human health. Like organic cotton, hemp mirrors the human body at an impressive frequency of 100' (Freeman, 2024).

Yellen and Yellen's 2013 paper lacks a methodology, and excludes citations from reliable sources, challenging the credibility of their scientific claims. The Ag-Environ machine used to measure fibre frequencies appears in no other scientific literature. Various wellness brands citing Yellen and Yellen 2013 assign hertz (Hz) values to different fibres. For example, linen and wool allegedly measure 5,000 Hz (Manufacture De Lin, n.d., para. 4; Freeman, 2024, para. 6). However, these measurements lack scientific or technological explanation.

Linen is not the only fibre which has been claimed to have healing properties – far infrared fibres (FIR) – are also marketed as reflecting energy waves, capitalising here both on the wellness and yoga trend of 'good vibes and good energy' and the health benefit of relieving pain and healing

a multitude of physical ailments. However, in contrast to linen, FIR fibres are synthetic, typically created by blending an FIR ceramic powder together directly with the fibre polymer to create a FIR yarn (Dyer, 2011).

Linen has remained a premium fibre, lending itself to fine, lightweight fabrics. Like all natural cellulose fibres, linen has a high moisture regain and thus dyes easily, but linen textiles are often comfortable to wear due to their high permeability to air and water vapor. Linen also has a high natural lustre, which can be increased in the finishing process through pressure (Kadolph, 2014). Thus, these combined properties of linen make it a valuable and desirable consumer fibre. Given linen's ancient origin, with Egypt being the source of some of the oldest documented linen fabrics, linen lends itself perfectly to mystified storytelling and spiritual greenwashing.

CASE STUDY: BAMBOO YOGA LEGGINGS

Within the wellness industry, the business of yogawear is expected to reach USD \$40 billion globally by 2028 (Smith, 2024). Many yogawear brands, including global players such as Alo Yoga and Lululemon Athletica, are known for capitalizing on the growing consumer demand for performance and technical garments and fabrics, and ethical, environmental, and health-conscious fabrics and fibres. Yogawear brands address these performance and functionality features using descriptive attributes of the fabrications such as 'quick-drying', 'four-way stretch', 'sweat-wicking', 'anti-microbial', and 'breathable', amongst others. Yogawear brands also address ethical, moral, and spiritual concerns by stating the attributes of their signature fabrications. Examples include: 'made with love and 'intention', 'guilt-free', and 'supportive, sculpting, soft, and eco-conscious'. Brands are adopting a form of mystified storytelling that transcends beyond the purely functional aspects of garments.

Technical fabric properties like 'wicking' and 'quick-drying' are often misunderstood and misused in marketing, despite extensive research. Scientific definitions often differ from consumer perceptions, and performance claims are typically oversimplified. For example, most consumers believe the term 'wicking' means that the fabric is able to 'wick' sweat and moisture away from the skin or between multiple layers of fabric.

However, within the scientific community, the term ‘wicking’ could also mean a fabric’s ability to wick water from a reservoir (Kissa, 1996). ‘Wicking’ between layers of fabrics has been reported only to occur when fabrics have complete contact between the layers and are fully saturated with water – conditions which may not always be exactly replicated during wear (Zhuang et al., 2002). In reality, fabric properties such as drying time are related to absorption, which is a result of complex interactions between fibre type, yarn structure, and fabric construction (Laing et al., 2007; Adler & Walsh, 1984), rather than being determined by a single factor. For example, Studio K, a Bali-based yogawear brand, sells leggings and activewear made primarily from bamboo and other certified organic fibres. The brand promotes itself as ‘earth-loving, ethical, and eco-friendly’ (Studio K, n.d., home page), blending fashion, functionality, and environmental consciousness to appeal to ‘conscious women’ who care about their environmental impact (Studio K, n.d., About us). Their products are described as soft, silky, durable, and ethically produced, embodying the fusion of spiritual, health, environmental, and social concerns that drive ethical consumption and spiritual greenwashing.

This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (1984/1986), where specialized knowledge and education create distinction, as well as Michele Lamont’s concept of moral capital (1992), linking ethical consumption with higher moral standards and good taste. Studio K’s use of certified bamboo suggests not only economic and cultural capital but also moral superiority, appealing to consumers who value sustainability and ethical practices. The brand reinforces this moral capital by emphasizing the careful sourcing of its fabrics, claiming to offer ‘guilt-free, long-lasting quality’.

However, Studio K complicates its narrative through engagement with mystified storytelling, particularly with its signature bamboo fabric. Products like the Eira High-Rise Bamboo Leggings (\$129 AUD) are marketed as ‘organic fabric that feels like a second skin’ made from ‘OEKO-TEX certified bamboo’ (Studio K, n.d., Eira High-Rise Bamboo Leggings) with ‘low-impact dyes’ (Studio K, n.d., Sustainability), but it is unclear whether the bamboo was cultivated using organic farming principles, leaving consumers to question the brand’s true environmental stewardship. Similarly,

the Runa High-Waisted Bamboo Undies (\$49 AUD) are promoted as having ‘antibacterial, moisture-wicking, and antifungal bio-agents’ (Studio K, n.d., Runa High-Waisted Bamboo Undies), claims which are likely tied to perceived consumer beliefs and values of health and hygiene. It is well known that anti-microbial properties of bamboo fibres are generally unsubstantiated (Afrin et al., 2012) yet claims of the anti-microbial properties of bamboo persist within the textile market. Bamboo is often misrepresented in the marketplace, with both brands and consumers perceiving bamboo as a natural fibre when most products labelled as bamboo are actually a semi-synthetic fibre more accurately known as viscose or sometimes bamboo viscose. This conflating of bamboo and viscose or rayon made using bamboo as feedstock has been so prevalent within the industry that in 2022 the United States Federal Trade Commission started fining companies for labelling products as bamboo when they were actually viscose rayon (SGS, 2022). Whether a product is composed of bamboo or viscose (of bamboo origin) is of particular relevance to anti-microbial properties. Whilst the bamboo plant is understood to have some natural anti-microbial properties, once bamboo is manufactured into viscose through a process which involves dissolving the bamboo pulp into carbon disulfide, no anti-microbial properties remain. This is reiterated by the US Federal Trade Commission: ‘There are no definitive studies to validate that the natural antimicrobial properties of the bamboo plant are retained in the resulting rayon fibre. The FTC notes that when bamboo is used as the cellulose source, the resulting rayon does not retain any of the natural antimicrobial properties of the bamboo plant. It is believed that the chemicals used to dissolve the plant material would eliminate its natural antimicrobial properties’ (SGS, 2022, para.5).

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE MARKETING

The decline in specialized textile knowledge, particularly in Australasia, where programs like Clothing and Textile Science at the University of Otago and the Bachelor of Textiles (Design) at RMIT University have been discontinued over the last five years, has concentrated expertise in manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh and

China. This shift contrasts with the widespread availability of fashion marketing knowledge, which poses a risk of developing and promoting products without proper scientific verification. Brands often leverage perceived credible sources to create compelling marketing narratives, a strategy known as ‘mystified storytelling’ (Kapferer & Bastien 2012; Luna Mora & Berry 2022). This approach, common among wellness textile brands, emphasizes dream-like attributes and founding myths over technical or performance qualities. It is crucial for consumers to understand the origins and validity of these types of claims. When brands reference objective properties, they should be verified by science to ensure accuracy. Additionally, brands must handle religious, spiritual, or cultural claims with care to avoid misinterpretation and misappropriation. The authors acknowledge the legitimacy of non-western scientific claims, and the subjective nature of preferences for certain fibres and fabrics. This paper highlights the ethical implications of misinterpreting scientific evidence to market textiles in the wellness sector. Entangling spiritual, sustainable and luxury attributes cause consumer confusion and hinders actual progress towards sustainability. Misrepresentation of claims can lead to serious consumer risks, particularly when products are believed to have health benefits. Despite not being marketed as medical devices, wellness products with strong health-related messages can be easily misinterpreted by consumers who lack specialised knowledge. Textile experts can play a vital role in interpreting test results and providing context for performance claims, thereby enhancing transparency and consumer trust. There is a growing need for brands to substantiate their marketing claims with scientific evidence, either through product testing or peer-reviewed research. Strict legislation around consumer products claims already exists to protect consumers, with increased legislation, especially around ‘green’ or ‘eco’ claims being introduced to combat greenwashing. Brands making wellness claims about products need to ensure that they are not engaging in spiritual greenwashing. Brands must prioritize accurate and honest communication to ensure consumer safety and maintain credibility in the marketplace.

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