SHADES OF GREEN

UNVEILING THE STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES OF GREENWASHING IN FASHION

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Abstract

The fashion industry faces significant challenges, including human rights and environmental concerns, prompting a shift toward sustainability. This shift reflects heightened awareness among stakeholders. However, alongside these positive developments, a trend has emerged: greenwashing. Defined as misleading consumers about a company's environmental practices, greenwashing complicates the industry's efforts to adopt sustainable practices and can perpetuate harmful behaviors. Despite extensive research highlighting the negative impacts of greenwashing, it continues to rise, indicating a gap in understanding the processes behind it. Various factors contribute to greenwashing within fashion businesses, yet these dynamics remain poorly understood. While market forces promoting greenwashing are recognized, the specific activities and organizational structures driving these decisions need further exploration. This research investigates the inner workings of fashion organizations, aiming to identify the structures and processes that lead to greenwashing. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with industry experts, it was found that greenwashing often occurs unintentionally due to misaligned goals, lack of knowledge sharing, greenhushing, and a need for shared definitions of sustainability claims. The findings underscore the need to adjust business structures and processes to mitigate greenwashing practices in the fashion industry and emphasize the importance of developing universal definitions and standards to enhance sustainability efforts.

Keywords: *Greenwashing, Fashion, Sustainability, Organizational development*

INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry faces various challenges, ranging from human rights to environmental concerns (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). As a multi-trillion dollar industry, the fashion industry contributes significantly to global issues, is responsible for an estimated 2-8 percent of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions, roughly 20 percent of the planet's wastewater, and accounts for 9 percent of the annual microplastic losses into the ocean (The UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 2021). Additionally, the fashion industry is experiencing a substantial loss of 100 billion dollars due to underutilization of materials and inadequate recycling (The UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 2021). Compounding these with

the fact that 98 percent of workers in the fashion industry earn salaries inadequate to sustain their families, as highlighted by the Global Slavery Index (2023). Growing awareness of the fashion industry's unethical practices has impacted consumer attitudes.

A 2022 study from Adamkiewicz J., Kochańska, Adamkiewicz, I., and Łukasik found that 71 percent of millennials polled express a desire for brands to prioritize environmental consciousness and ethical practice. The same study revealed that 61 percent want brands more connected to social issues (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). Many brands within the fashion industry have begun to adopt a series of changes toward more sustainable business models. Changes such as

new operational approaches and processes oriented to less destructive and more sustainable business models (McNeill & Moore, 2015). More brands are being mindful in choosing lower impact preferred materials and opting for circular practices that lead to more sustainable options in their product lines (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022).

Despite these efforts, a concerning trend has emerged amidst these potentially positive changes—greenwashing (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). Greenwashing, "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service" (TerraChoice, 2010, p.1), takes various forms and affects a wide range of stakeholders. Its consequences include hindering consumers from making informed decisions and causing confusion (Chen & Chang, 2012; Wu et al., 2020). Ultimately, this confusion from greenwashing can foster skepticism among consumers, reducing their willingness to pay for products perceived as more sustainable (Lee et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2023). An important reaction to greenwashing that should be acknowledged is greenhushing, which is under communicating or avoiding sustainability communication entirely (Ginder et al., 2019). Greenwashing and greenhushing lead to uncertainty and skepticism about sustainable practices within the fashion industry, potentially perpetuating harmful social and environmental practices and hindering progress toward a more ethical fashion industry (Yadav et al., 2023).

Despite a wealth of academic research highlighting the detrimental impact of greenwashing on businesses and society (Martínez et al., 2020), the instances of such practices continues to rise (Montgomery et al., 2023). This persistence suggests a gap in our understanding of the greenwashing process. Numerous intricate processes may contribute to greenwashing within a fashion business, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Presently, these processes are not fully understood or appreciated. While existing literature analyzes the market forces encouraging greenwashing, the specific activities, and organizational dynamics within fashion businesses that drive greenwashing decisions remain unclear and under investigated. This study aims to gain insight into the decision-making process within fashion businesses which results in greenwashing and the underlying motivations for such behavior. Understand-ing the processes and structures that may foster greenwashing can pinpoint areas where efforts can be concentrated to diminish greenwashing in the fashion industry.

Understanding the mechanisms behind greenwashing is vital for the future prosperity of the fashion industry. By exploring the decision-making processes and motivations that lead to greenwashing, stakeholders can identify areas for improvement and promote a culture of transparency. This knowledge not only helps mitigate greenwashing but also enhances the industry's overall impact on the economy, environment, and society. Furthermore, by investigating these business processes and structures, we can potentially improve regulatory guidance and effectiveness. Many businesses may be unaware of potential blind spots that hinder improvements to internal systems, which could inadvertently support deceptive practices. Failing to examine these dynamics risks allowing greenwashing to continue unchecked, reducing the credibility of earnest sustainability efforts across the fashion industry and reducing the value these efforts are capable of producing for fashion businesses. The central research question guiding this investigation is: What business structures and processes intentionally or unintentionally support greenwashing behavior of fashion brands in the United States?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach was adopted involving seven A qualitative approach was adopted involving seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experts in sustainability (5) and marketing (2) within the fashion industry. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to the sensitive nature of greenwashing discussions, providing a confidential environment conducive to open dialogue (Elam & Fenton, 2003). Participants were guaranteed anonymity to encourage candid responses, allowing for the exploration of unanticipated discussion topics, thereby enhancing data quality.

The study included seven professionals representing a range of company sizes all from either marketing or sustainability departments within fashion companies. Each interviewee had a strong understanding of communication processes in the fashion industry, which is important given the limited research on business practices linked to greenwashing. Participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network and

connections cultivated over years in the industry. Participants were contacted via email and LinkedIn in early September 2023, with interviews conducted between September 22 and October 30, 2023. Interviews took place via Zoom and each session was recorded and transcribed using the online research management platform Condens, averaging 39 minutes long, with the shortest at 29 minutes and the longest at 46 minutes.

The questions posed were crafted to gain insights into greenwashing within a fashion organization and explore the specific business processes that allow for this practice to happen (intentionally or unintentionally). The conversations were focused on their organization's involvement in greenwashing and the challenges encountered when mitigating it. The inquiries spanned various areas, including sustainability within their roles, cross-functional communication within their company, and specific instances of greenwashing. Interviews concluded with an invitation for the participant to share any additional reflections or insights from their own experiences. Open-ended questions provided flexibility for unique perspectives.

Strict confidentiality was maintained for participants' identities and their organizations, encouraging open dialogue without fear of exposing sensitive information. Participants could decline any question or end the interview at any time. Each interviewee was assigned a unique identifier to preserve anonymity during data analysis.

Analysis began with a thorough review of audio recordings and transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Noteworthy excerpts from the transcriptions were extracted and transferred into a private Google document file, encompassing elements emphasized by interviewees, recurring themes across multiple interviews, and unique perspectives. An inductive coding approach was employed, generating systematic codes to identify themes from the interviews.

The analysis identified several key themes: (1) the impact of knowledge sharing and resource constraints, (2) the conflict between storytelling and greenwashing, (3) the need for universal regulations and standards, and (4) the concept of greenhushing. These themes were organized into color-coded sections within the transcriptions and further evaluated for deeper insights, leading to conclusive findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed several notable findings in the effort to understand what business structures and processes support greenwashing behavior of fashion brands in the United States. Every organization involved in the interviews acknowledged instances of greenwashing, emphasizing that these were often unintentional. They implemented measures like cross-functional knowledge sharing, internal communication protocols, certifications, and thorough reviews of sustainability messaging. However, a critical question remained: Why does greenwashing persist despite these safeguards?

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN STORYTELLING AND FACTUAL ACCURACY

Six of the seven interview subjects disclosed that a significant factor contributing to greenwashing in their organization was the tension between the competing goals of the sustainability department, which is focused on factual accuracy, and the marketing team's objective to craft compelling narratives. Interview Subject (IS) #1 shared

I think [greenwashing] can just be excitement on the part of the marketing and comms teams. [Marketing] will often take from things in their personal lives, or things they have read about, or whatever the case may be, and sort of embellish because that is their job to write and romanticize really beautiful language.

A recurring observation among the six was that marketing departments encountered difficulties developing a compelling narrative that met the approval of the sustainability teams. IS #5 explained

It is also really hard when you are trying to put together a marketing story because you want to be able to talk about things and embellish and be descriptive and, you know, create a world and a story. Being factual and concise does not always permit that.

The tension between the commitment to factual accuracy from the sustainability department and the marketing team's goal of crafting compelling narratives emerged as a significant factor contributing to greenwashing. Interviewees noted that this delicate balance often leads to embellishments, making it challenging for both

departments to align their goals and ultimately contributing to greenwashing.

In companies where sustainability was less prioritized, a lack of cross-functional education and knowledge hindered effective communication. This educational gap within marketing teams can lead to difficulties to accurately convey sustainability claims, increasing the risk of greenwashing. Without a strong emphasis on sustainability at all levels, organizations struggle to share updated information effectively, complicating their efforts to navigate the evolving sustainability landscape.

GREENHUSHING

While the questions of the study focused on greenwashing practices, greenhushing was a common theme that emerged. Five of the seven participants noted the practice of avoiding sustainability communication entirely, as a notable theme. IS # 4 said

Anytime I have tried to bring sustainability into the conversation from a marketing perspective, my boss is very, 'we have to be careful we do not want to say something that we are not actually doing.' They are very careful about how it is said, how it is marketed. So, in a sense, they are kind of trying to avoid [greenwashing] without maybe knowing that they are trying to avoid it. I think since we are such a big company, we have to be careful about what we say, how we say it, and what we stand behind because there could be more repercussions.

Greenhushing emerged as a shared concern within the industry despite their commitments to sustainability. IS #3 said

At a certain point, greenhushing becomes a concern. The customer is given no information about how to make better purchasing decisions. That is more of what I am afraid of. What does it look like if the pendulum swings so far to the left on greenwashing regulation that brands are like, 'I am just not going to communicate anything about my efforts'. And then customers have no information on which to base their purchasing decisions.

Some interviewees acknowledged that they participated in greenhushing before gaining confidence in their sustainability initiatives. They mentioned believing that other fashion companies were also adopting a similar approach, partly driven by a fear of being called out publicly. IS# 6 said

When we started this journey, we did not discuss it for almost two years…we were really afraid to talk about it. And that was when call-out culture was not even as much as it is now. So, I understand why greenhushing has become a thing or that people fall into greenwashing because they just do not know how to navigate this space.

While not classified as a formal process or structure, greenhushing emerged as a prevalent theme throughout this study with substantial influence on other identified factors. IS #2 conveyed that numerous fashion brands grapple with whether it is worthwhile to communicate their sustainability efforts and identify more sustainable products or if they should choose to remain silent. This behavior was perceived as a prevalent trend among fashion companies, partly driven by a fear of criticism within the growing call-out culture.

Greenhushing reflects the pressing need for increased regulation and standards in the fashion industry. The apprehension among companies about potential backlash for miscommunication indicates a fear of making statements that could be perceived negatively by other brands or consumers. More explicit guidance on sustainable communication and sustainability standards would help mitigate the confusion surrounding appropriate messaging.

TIME CONSTRAINTS AFFECTING KNOWLEDGE SHARING

All seven interview subjects identified a lack of knowledge sharing as a key factor contributing to greenwashing, with time constraints for educating staff on sustainability practices being a prominent issue. The participants noted that a manual review of external communications was a primary method for preventing greenwashing, but the insufficient time allocated for these reviews often led to lapses. IS #1 stated, "In my perfect world, it would be a lot less work to [review communications] on the part of [the sustainability team]. We spend quite a bit of our weekly hours."

This sentiment was echoed by others who expressed a desire for sustainability to be integrated into every organizational function, reducing the burden on sustainability teams to educate others. For instance, IS #7 remarked, "I feel like

it is on me to communicate all things [related to sustainability]. Other teams, like the raw materials team, should be educating everybody about [sustainability]."

Existing research highlights that successful sustainability practices hinge on effective communication and knowledge-sharing (Khan et al., 2016; Van Hoof & Thiell, 2014). Sustainability must extend beyond departmental boundaries, becoming a cross-organizational value (Atiq & Karatas-Ozkan, 2013). Collaborative efforts among employees are essential for achieving organizational sustainability, yet time and resource limitations significantly hinder such communication.

Throughout the interviews, participants reiterated that a lack of knowledge sharing was a significant driver of greenwashing. They faced challenges in educating their teams about effectively communicating sustainability claims. Many expressed feeling stretched thin with their responsibilities, wishing they could dedicate more time to education but facing financial resource limitations. Some interviewees shared transformative experiences, noting that while manual reviews initially presented significant challenges, investing in training for team members resulted in a more efficient process over time. One participant noted a significant reduction in time spent reviewing external communications compared to a year prior, attributing this improvement to comprehensive sustainability communication training initiatives. This demonstrates the positive impact of investing in education and training, leading to increased efficiency and reduced instances of greenwashing.

While educational investments have shown promise, financial and time constraints remain significant barriers. One potential solution for fashion organizations is to establish a dedicated role within the marketing team to verify the accuracy of sustainability communications. This would ease the burden on sustainability teams, balance storytelling with the accuracy of sustainability claims, and reduce the need for extensive education across the two departments.

Such a dedicated role could improve cross-functional collaboration between marketing and sustainability departments, providing a worthwhile investment considering the financial risks associated with greenwashing. Greenwashing not only breeds consumer skepticism but also diminishes trust in a brand, ultimately affecting customers' willingness to pay for products associat-ed with misleading claims (Lee et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2023).

While greenwashing currently lacks comprehensive regulation in the United States, companies can face legal repercussions under Section 43a of the Lanham Act for false representations in advertising (Feinstein, 2012). Additionally, many fashion companies based in the United States also conduct business in the European Union which has expanded its regulation on greenwashing under the Green Claims Directive. The directive was proposed in 2023 and requires businesses to substantiate their environmental claims with credible and independent evidence before making them (European Commision, 2023).

Therefore, fostering an environment of transparency and shared knowledge is crucial for mitigating greenwashing and promoting sustainable practices in the fashion industry. This research underscores the need for organizations to optimize their resources and strategies for educating teams, paving the way for more responsible and informed sustainability communication.

SHARED DEFINITIONS AND GUIDANCE

Four of the seven interview subjects identified the absence of shared definitions and guidance for sustainability claims as a significant factor contributing to greenwashing. The frustration among the interview subjects stems from the varied definitions of sustainability across companies, leading to greenwashing incidents when different definitions of greenwashing don't line up. IS# 2 said, "The number one biggest driver of greenwashing is that different people have different definitions of what it seems to be sustainable."

The interviewees also shared that they often felt confused due to a lack of standardization and regulation of greenwashing. IS #7 said,

More guidance on what we can and cannot say would be helpful because I feel like we are all just trying our best, but we do not know what we are allowed to say about sustainability. For example, there is no law against saying eco-friendly [In the United States], but nobody uses it anymore, right?

Interviewees emphasized the need for clearer regulations, indicating that a standardized framework would improve communication about sustainability practices and reduce greenwashing. The lack of a shared definition complicates

brands' efforts to avoid greenwashing, and existing regulations in the United States, such as the FTC Green Guides and Section 43a of the Lanham Act, have not fully addressed these challenges (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Feinstein, 2012). Without clear guidance, brands navigate based on varying interpretations, leading to confusion and potential greenwashing incidents. This highlights the urgent need for accepted definitions of sustainability claims to clarify expectations and improve communication in the industry.

Interviewees who reported fewer instances of greenwashing had taken it upon themselves to create detailed internal frameworks guiding their sustainable communications, as articulated by IS #1: "It is a daily focus for us, and while the industry lacks robust regulation, we have established best practices to ensure accuracy and factual representation."

However, challenges persist; other interviewees expressed difficulty navigating an industry characterized by a lack of robust regulation. IS #7 emphasized the need for extensive education and guidance, eagerly anticipating the release of new green guides for further clarity and direction. These insights highlight the nuanced landscape fashion organizations navigate to communicate sustainability amidst varying degrees of regulation and underscore the fashion industry need for enhanced guidance and standards. To navigate this uncertain terrain, fashion companies can create internal documents detailing current sustainability regulations and guidance in other countries (such as the Green Claims Directive) for acceptable sustainability communication, and share cross-functionally.

This proposal suggests that individual brands could take a more responsible approach to handling sustainability communication, but it also emphasizes the importance of the industry itself taking responsibility for regulating these claims. The fashion industry in the United States could benefit greatly from putting in place stricter regulations and guidance for sustainability communication and claims. These steps are crucial for creating an environment that supports the prosperous development and progress of sustainability initiatives in the fashion industry.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This study delves into the intricate dynamics of sustainability communication within the fashion industry, unraveling the complexities of greenwashing and the business structures and processes that support greenwashing behavior within fashion organizations. The conflict between engaging storytelling and accurate sustainability information is evident, with six interview subjects citing this tension between sustainability and marketing teams. Time and knowledge constraints hinder effective communication, emphasizing the need for better cross functional education systems. A lack of shared sustainability definitions and guidance contributes to confusion and greenwashing. The industry's silence on sustainability, known as "greenhushing," underscores the necessity for enhanced regulations. Companies' reluctance to communicate openly reflects a fear of potential criticism that could be viewed negatively by other brands or consumers. Clearer guidelines on sustainable communication and established sustainability standards would aid in reducing the uncertainty surrounding appropriate messaging.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Establishing sustainability as a shared value across the organization. Additionally, a dedicated role within the marketing team for verifying the accuracy of communications could be a viable compromise, alleviating time constraints and educating the cross-functional relationship. The study also emphasizes the importance of implementing stringent regulations and guidance in the United States to foster a transparent and standardized communication landscape. Until more explicit guidance is available, fashion companies in the United States are advised to depend on regulation from other countries such as The Green Claims Directive. Such guidance can be shared cross-functionally through internally shared documents outlining sustainability communication guidance.

Navigating these complexities can pave the way for effective sustainability initiatives, ensuring accurate communication, collaborative knowledge-sharing, and shared industry standards. Reducing instances of greenwashing is essential. Authentic and transparent green claims can build customer trust in sustainable purchases, leading to increased willingness to invest in environmentally friendly companies (Chen & Chang, 2013; Wu et al., 2020). This trust, in turn, enhances customer

engagement and profitability. Furthermore, decreasing greenwashing levels legitimizes sustainable practices, fosters partnerships, and encourages innovation, contributing to a more prosperous fashion ecosystem. (De Jong et al., 2020).

Ultimately, implementing changes in business structures and processes is essential for minimizing greenwashing instances and mitigating their negative impacts. This research highlights that fostering a more responsible and transparent business environment can better serve and protect the interests of all stakeholders, including consumers. By aligning business practices with genuine sustainability efforts, the fashion industry can thrive economically while positively impacting the environment and society, ensuring a prosperous future for all involved.

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