

SELLING SUSTAINABILITY:
THE FINE LINE BETWEEN GREENWASHING AND
GREEN ADVERTISING IN FASHION

by

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Climate change isn't a faraway concept; it is happening globally right now. One factor contributing to this global concern is the fashion industry. With overconsumption becoming the new normal and fast fashion dominating the marketplace, the planet faces the detrimental effects of fashion's overwhelming reach. Some brands try to make a difference by slowing down their production, sourcing ethical fibers, paying employees livable wages, and using fewer resources. These competitive advantages often came through in their advertising, setting them apart from their more harmful counterparts. Therein lies the issue at hand. What happens when brands use the same advertising techniques without changing their practices? The answer is greenwashing, defined here as any advertising involving "a discrepancy between organizations' green claims and their actual environmental performance" (De Jong, 2019, p. 39). This project examines the difference between greenwashing and the advertising of genuinely sustainable clothing brands. I aim to answer two questions: Do green advertising practices in the clothing industry differentiate themselves from greenwashing, and, in turn, do these practices influence purchasing decisions/intent among Generation Z consumers aged 18 to 25? Further, I suggest what strategies advertisers can incorporate to differentiate their products from greenwashing and encourage slower/more sustainable consumption. This will be done through a mixed methods approach,

using secondary research investigating advertising and fashion trade publications, in addition to conducting primary research to learn from this demographic firsthand. Finally, I offer recommendations to improve industry practices and to aid consumers in understanding how to navigate purchase decisions.

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Introduction

Growing up in a world heavily influenced by social media, my generation was surrounded by overconsumption. Every week on TikTok feels like a new trending aesthetic is introduced, and if you don't keep up, or worse, you continue to wear last week's trending top today, you are completely out of style. I know I am not the only one who has fallen victim to microtrends in fashion, like "coquette" with bows on absolutely everything, or thinking bucket hats would always be in style, and thus buying multiple that, to this day, I have maybe worn once. It also seems impossible to scroll Instagram in late December without an excessive "What I Got for Christmas Haul" showing off mountains of clothes or even just an everyday shopping haul because they were bored. With fast fashion being easily accessible at low prices and fast shipping, it is hard to resist the urge to give in to these trends.

Although it is quite problematic to follow these microtrends that promote overconsumption, what could be even more detrimental is that environmental sustainability is becoming a trend. Conservation must be talked about more, but this also creates the risk of sustainability becoming a selling tactic to deceive Generation Z (people born between 1997 and 2012). Advertisers are keenly aware that it is trendy to care about the environment. It has become so much of a trend that people in Generation Z are 23% more likely to completely agree with the statement that "it is important to me that others see me as being environmentally conscious" (MRI Simmons 2023). This leads to them wanting to shop environmentally friendly and stumbling into traps like Pacsun's "sustainable" collection. Brands like this are using sustainability as a buzzword to get people to pay extra for certified natural cotton with no proof of what that means. There are fashion companies that are working hard to decrease their footprint and provide high-quality clothing produced ethically that uses the environment as a keystone in

their advertising. However, this revitalization of greenwashing is becoming increasingly more prevalent and making the two types of brands harder to differentiate. Is this something that the vast majority of Generation Z is aware of or cares about? This led to the main research questions of this thesis and an interesting study into seeing how topics that seem contradictory (advertising and the environment) can work together to develop a cleaner future through recommendations to people in the industry and consumers. This study investigates how the advertising industry and fashion industry talk about greenwashing, as well as how consumers perceive greenwashing, and if that perception impacts their purchasing intentions and overall brand attitude.

Literature Review

Overconsumption is a very prominent issue in the world right now. Humans are manufacturing items beyond their means and their needs. The fashion industry contributes to this by continuously adapting to new styles and microtrends with the knowledge that, at the same speed they come into trend, they will be considered out of style and thrown away. This has led to around 11.3 tons of fabric waste in the United States landfills annually (Igini, 2024). These brands maximize profits by using inexpensive materials that are harmful for the environment (from the water use to chemicals used in manufacturing), throwing their waste into landfills (this is sometimes rolls upon rolls of good fabric), and unethical labor (Ardley, 2020). It has been theorized that overconsumption happens not because people are consuming too much on their own, but because production is driving consumption when it should be reversed (Stuart, 2020). With fast fashion companies increasing production and advertising of products, it creates a false want for these pieces of clothing and, therefore, allows production to drive consumption. This is only escalated when companies say they are “sustainable” or “eco-friendly”. Because these terms are so vague, they can make these claims without adding the details of how they are helping reduce their footprint.

In response to climate change, some clothing companies tried to cut back on waste, and others defined their company by its environmentally friendly values. These values are often highlighted in the advertising of the products using several eco-labels, like organic (sometimes used to describe cotton). Labels like these hold value because they are regulated with set standards they must meet to be considered organic (McEvoy, 2011). As people started to value this when shopping, non-environmentally conscious companies wanted to capitalize on consumers’ affinity towards sustainable products. Consumers are often tricked by these

strategically worded advertisements, which dilute the power of sustainable ones, a phenomenon referred to as greenwashing. The influx of greenwashing made consumers skeptical of genuine attempts at companies' environmental conservation (United Nations, n.d.). This leads us to a problem of how sustainable companies can differentiate themselves in advertising among countless companies' greenwashing, and if consumers will see this difference and let it motivate them to purchase from the more sustainable options.

Greenwashing

Greenwashing was first documented in 1983 when Jay Westerveld, an environmentalist, saw a sign at a resort encouraging guests to reuse their towels to help the environment. This seems like a positive initiative for the environment, but at the same time, this resort was destroying the surrounding nature to expand the building. This shows an insincere attempt to appear more environmentally conscious than the company really is. He then published an article about this incident and wrote: "It all comes out in the greenwash." From there, this term took off and started to gain a lot of traction in the 2000s, with rising concern about the environment, and was officially added to the dictionary in 2022. From this rise in awareness, some preventative laws have been put in place, but the practice of greenwashing still persists (Macesar, 2025). As a more recent term, there has been some debate as to what greenwashing encompasses. Canadian environmental marketing consulting firm TerraChoice's Seven Sins of Greenwashing offers a practice-oriented framework for classifying greenwashing in advertising and marketing (Green Business Benchmark, 2024). The first sin is the sin of hidden trade-offs. This is when a company claims positive environmental attributes because of one aspect, but neglects the negative implications of the same product. For example, transitioning from plastic straws to paper straws, but the plastic ones are recyclable, whereas the paper ones are not (Green Business Benchmark,

2021). The second is the sin of no proof, which is when a claim cannot be backed up by easily accessible data or certifications. An example is claiming that a product was created with a certain percentage less emissions, with no easily identifiable data. The third is the sin of vagueness, which, as implied in the name, is when labels are used for products that lack specificity or regulation and become meaningless. This is often seen when products are labeled with things like “natural”, “sustainable”, or “environmentally friendly” (Change Plastic for Good, 2023). Number four is the sin of worshipping false labels. This is when a product gives itself fake certifications to trick consumers, with nothing to support these false labels. The fifth sin is irrelevance. This sin occurs when a positive environmental feature is highlighted in the advertising of a product, but that feature doesn’t matter. A common example is emphasizing that a product is CFC-free, but CFCs have been banned for years, so this label means nothing since all the competitor products are also CFC-free. The sixth is the sin of the lesser of two evils. This means that a product is being labeled as better for the environment to distract consumers from how damaging that product category truly is, like claiming a car is more fuel efficient (which could be true), but it doesn’t take away from how bad for the environment cars filled with gasoline are. Lastly, the sin of fibbing. This is when a company just flat-out lies (Green Business Benchmark, 2021). These sins are regularly referred to in the sustainable business and advertising world, but it is a lot to remember and oftentimes overlaps, so this thesis will use the more concise explanation that greenwashing is any advertising involving “a discrepancy between organizations’ green claims and their actual environmental performance” (De Jong, 2019, p. 39). This includes everything from exaggerations to intentional vagueness to flat-out lies. As greenwashing continues, it has become increasingly important to identify it and implement changes in current advertising practices.

Defining Additional Terms

Before expanding on the literature, it is important to define these key terms often used as buzzwords. For the purposes of this thesis and study, the definition of **fast fashion** used will be by Rashmila Maiti: “cheaply produced and priced garments that copy the latest catwalk styles and get pumped quickly through stores in order to maximize on current trends” (Maiti, 2025).

The next important term is the inverse of fast fashion, **slow fashion**. This type of company takes all levels of the supply chain into account, ensuring ethical production, sustainable sourcing, and clothing focusing on quality and longevity. Slow fashion brands are less trend-driven and embed the environment into the core of their company. Because of this, the planet is considered on every level of the supply chain (Marquis, 2021).

Another key term is **sustainable** or **sustainability**. For a company to be sustainable, its efforts must start at a corporate level, ensuring ethical and eco-friendly practices are a business-wide priority. If the company is eco-friendly, the production of the company’s items would minimize waste, chemicals used, and greenhouse gases emitted. It also must look at the life cycle of the item and establish the influence it has on the environment once it ends up in the landfill. If it is ethical, it would ensure people are working under ethical conditions (safe work environments and given livable wages). Lastly, its advertising must not fall under greenwashing (Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001).

The **green gap** is the difference between consumers’ mindset towards sustainability and their actions (Dubreuil & Borraz, 2025). This disconnect often appears when they want a more eco-friendly lifestyle, but they won’t take action to implement it. Even with green intentions, this is still a prominent issue. This is why it is often important to separate attitude and intended action in a study.

The last term important to address is **microtrends**. A word recently becoming popular in an attempt to de-influence consumption by highlighting the short-term use of specific items that will quickly be seen as out of style. This often occurs in fashion often characterized by people placing specific styles into a hyper-niche aesthetic. This decreases the longevity of keeping clothing items because as soon as they are considered “in”, they become outdated and a new style takes over (Schulz, 2024).

Review of Previous Studies

Looking at past experiments helped guide this research and has aided in establishing the methods used in this experiment. In 2018, Alamsyah and Syarifuddin conducted a study in Bandung City to see how supermarket shoppers’ purchases are swayed by environmentally friendly advertisements. Each person who picked up the item off the shelf was given a survey, and they received 120 responses where the participants discussed why they chose the environmentally friendly option. From the responses, they found that “green advertising and green brand image had truly positive correlations with green awareness; it also correlates positively with green purchase intention” (Alamsyah et al., 2018, p. 5). While this study was effective in seeing motivations for pre-existing green shoppers, it missed an entire potential market of people who did not grab those items and possibly find out why. This second part, which was missed, is addressed by the experiment in this thesis, as it examines not only those who chose green products but Generation Z consumers in general. The study, therefore, helps inform advertisers about what they can do differently to reach a larger market.

Another study by Lascity and Cairns (2020) examined four different clothing brands’ advertisements in stores and across social media platforms. They found that the brands highlighted their green initiatives online, but rarely in stores. They also found some irony in the

posts because instead of promoting education on the effects of the fashion industry, they instead continued to encourage consumption, just with incentives to recycle their clothing after use (Lascity & Cairns, 2020). While this study identified a disconnect between in-store and online messaging, it lacked insight into how to improve or how consumers felt about this discrepancy between online and in-store messaging, and the paradox of encouraging overconsumption, a phenomenon that aligns with greenwashing.

In the UK, a study was done to determine consumer attitudes towards sustainable fashion. They focused on consumers' awareness, how consumers make decisions, and how customers feel when fast fashion incorporates sustainable elements. This study was carried out through an online survey and found that awareness decreases when the budget share and knowledge of fast fashion increase, and the cognitive index and the affective index influence consumption decisions for fast fashion (Zhang, 2021). This provides insight into a similar question that this thesis discusses; however, this one will delve into more specific demographics and American consumers, which will be interesting to compare to for a more well-rounded, global study.

A number of studies have been done looking at sustainable advertising, sustainable clothing, and discussing the interaction of the two, but there is still a large gap in knowledge that this thesis aims to fill.

Gap in Knowledge

A study was done by Fiona Harris, Helen Roby, and Sally Dibb (2016) using key informant interviews to investigate how to encourage more sustainable behavior from consumers. Some participants suggested that the mere availability of sustainable clothing won't encourage consumption because the average consumer is not informed about the harm the textile industry causes. They also pointed out how each consumer is different and might care about

different aspects of the clothing industry. All of these aspects must be communicated in the advertising of sustainable clothing for it to be effective (Harris et al., 2016). This study, however, did not lay out clear suggestions for how advertisers can move forward or specify what strategies would be most effective in advertising. These suggestions will be a key part of this thesis in order to conclude the research with an actionable takeaway. Another gap in knowledge that this research aims to fill is how specifically Generation Z feels about sustainable clothing advertising and if they can tell the difference between that and greenwashing. Generation Z often claims to be the more environmentally and socially conscious generation, so it was important to see if this is reflected in consumption habits, advertising-related attitudes, and decision-making. In addition, Generation Z is becoming one of the largest shopping groups as they are reaching maturity, having greater agency and financial independence. This research aims to be highly specific to Generation Z purchasing intentions in the fashion industry so that the learned implications can be directly applied to the advertising industry. This literature helped in the development of this thesis and can also serve as a comparison between the research concluded here and past experiments.

Survey Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a

Generation Z consumers who have high environmental awareness, define themselves as environmentally conscious, and are more reluctant to trust a brand's green claims, are less likely to have positive brand attitudes.

Hypothesis 1b

Generation Z consumers who have high environmental awareness, define themselves as environmentally conscious, and are more reluctant to trust a brand's green claims, are less likely to have positive purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 2a

Generation Z consumers who are exposed to green ads will correctly identify them as green ads versus greenwashing ads.

Hypothesis 2b

Consumers who are exposed to green ads would report lower relative greenwashing perception than those exposed to greenwashing ads.

Hypothesis 2c

Consumers who identified their ad exposure as green advertising would report lower relative greenwashing perception than those who identified them as greenwashing ads.

Hypothesis 3a

Advertisements characterized as green advertising rather than greenwashing are associated with favorable brand attitudes among Generation Z consumers.

Hypothesis 3b

Advertisements characterized as green advertising rather than greenwashing are associated with favorable purchase intentions among Generation Z consumers.

Hypothesis 4a

Generation Z consumers' perceptions of greenwashing will be more negatively associated with brand attitudes than those who perceived green advertisements.

Hypothesis 4b

Generation Z consumers' perceptions of greenwashing will be more negatively associated with purchasing intentions than those who perceived green advertisements.

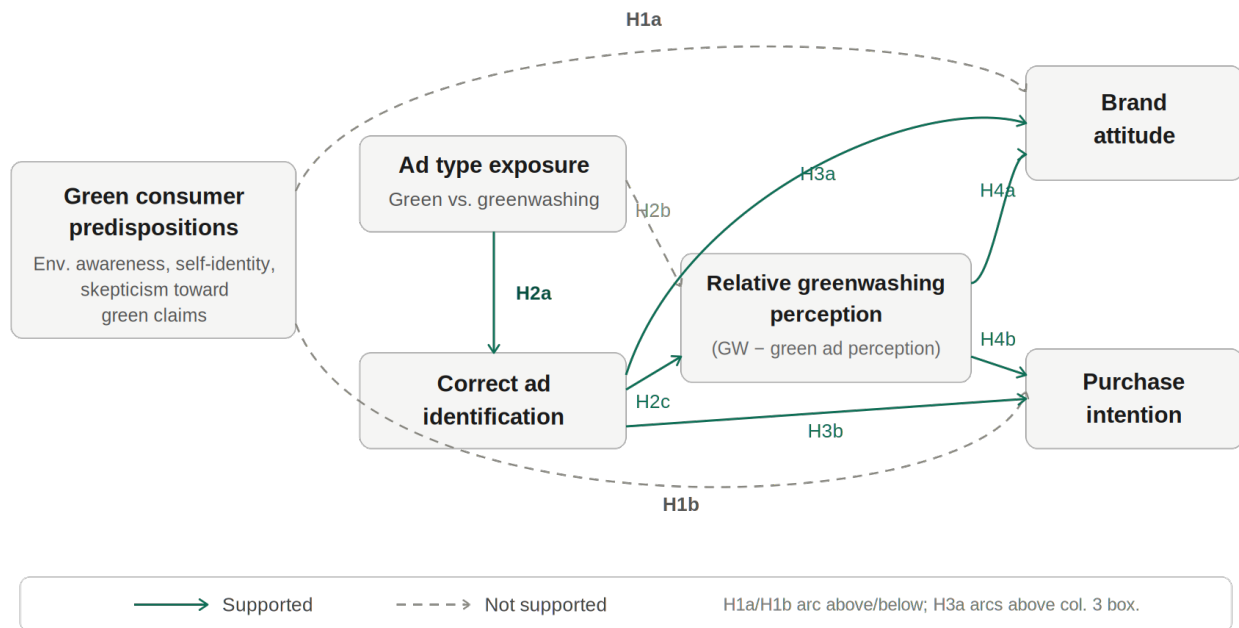


Figure 1: Hypotheses

A visual model of study hypotheses and their interconnections.

Methods

For this thesis, I used a combination of data types and analysis methods to evaluate how a green brand reputation, through advertising, influences purchase decisions for young adults aged 18 to 25 in the clothing industry, and how advertisers can capitalize on it.

Content Analysis

I started by looking into trade publications in both the advertising industry and the fashion industry to see what advertisers and fashion brands are already doing and where gaps in knowledge are most important for me to fill with recommendations. Two publications were chosen for the advertising industry and the fashion industry to get a more comprehensive view of what people in each industry are thinking and talking about. This minimized errors by seeing where topics overlapped and eliminating possible biases. This content analysis focuses on articles published from January 2025 to March 2026.

The two advertising trade publications I analyzed were *Adweek* and *Ad Age*. Both are prominent in the industry and have been around for decades. For fashion trade publications, I studied *Business of Fashion* and *California Apparel News*. *Business of Fashion* offers a more global take, and *California Apparel News* offers local insight. California is an especially prominent state in the United States for fashion brands and trends. I conducted a qualitative content analysis on these publications to understand what is currently being said about sustainability in these two very related fields, and find common themes, as well as what perspectives from one are lacking in the other and could be added.

Experiment

Population & Sample

I conducted an online survey experiment among the target age group, 18- to 25-year-olds. I obtained participants by talking to my professors and having them encourage students to participate in my study, as well as distributing the link via social media, and reaching out to people in my community within this demographic. The survey was carried out from late November 2025 to early April 2026.

Procedure

I created three different mock advertisements for three different fake clothing brands. One was an example of sustainable advertising, or green advertising, displaying transparency in materials and production (Appendix A). The second was an example of greenwashing with vague wording, false claims, and buzzwords/imagery (Appendix B). The last was a clothing advertisement not related to the environment whatsoever, as a control (Appendix C). I first showed these three advertisements to a handful of people as pilot ads to see the initial perception and got feedback before starting my study. I applied these corrections to make the differentiation between the advertising tactics clearer. This survey was conducted on Qualtrics, and when the link was sent out, it randomized which of the three advertisements was shown to each participant. This random sampling technique minimized errors in biases and unequal distributions. Before beginning the survey, participants were first given an informed consent notice and an approval box to check. They then completed questions about their current shopping habits and their preliminary knowledge of greenwashing. Next, they were given the shortened definition of greenwashing and green advertising used throughout this study. Greenwashing was described as referring to “any advertising involving ‘a discrepancy between organizations’ green

claims and their actual environmental performance’. This includes everything from exaggerations, intentional vagueness, and flat-out lies. It also applies if the environment isn’t at the core of the company/is an afterthought, their actions are not genuine, and they are hurting the environment.” Green advertising was defined as “a brand advertising products with genuine environmental benefits with sustainability at the core of the company. Such advertisements are not intentionally vague, do not contain exaggeration, and often back up their claims.” The next page of the survey contained the advertisement. Each participant was only shown one. They then answered questions to help us determine if they detected greenwashing, green advertising, or neither. The questions also helped us understand if there is a cause-and-effect relationship between sustainability and purchasing intentions and greenwashing and purchasing intentions. I studied the relationships of the survey answers using IBM SPSS Statistics.

Measures

I measured green attitudes using questions on a Likert Scale. For example, on a five-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, how much do you relate to the statement “I do my best to be as environmentally friendly as possible”? This was an easy starting question that gave us a lens into how the participant views the planet and their contributions.

One way I measured the participants’ experience of seeing sustainability used as an advertising tactic was, at the very end, asking if they think others would find the advertisement to be greenwashing. This uses subjective norms to get a more honest response, and since it is at the end, it won’t sway their previous questions. I evaluated their yes or no answers and identified the most common response. I also included a follow-up question asking why they think this. I evaluated their perception of greenwashing with straightforward questions, such as how they rate the brand. This used a bipolar scale to show intensity in responses with a range from “good” to

“bad”, “greenwashing” to “green advertising”, and more, to explore the varying degrees of effect the advertisement has on people.

Lastly, purchasing intentions were measured using questions asking participants to what extent they agreed with statements about their likelihood and willingness to buy from Joyce’s Closet if they needed a product shown, based solely on the advertisement. This used a similar analysis as before, rating statements by how much they agreed with them. After collecting this data, I ran reliability tests, linear regressions, and chi-squares to determine if my hypotheses were supported. Finally, I used the results of this experiment, along with the content analysis conducted of the trade publications, to inform my recommendations.

Measures Calculated

Questions to gauge **environmental awareness** were combined into one. These questions asked participants to rank statements on a scale of one through five, based on how much they agreed with them. These statements ranged from “I try to be as environmentally friendly as possible” to “I feel interested in a fashion brand that engages in promoting sustainability.” Put together, this variable had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .807, a mean of 3.53, and a standard deviation of 3.16.

To learn the **environmental consciousness** levels of the population, two questions were asked. First, participants rated their environmental consciousness from one to five and then were asked how much the environmental effects of clothing influence their purchasing decisions (also on a scale of one to five). These questions had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .65, a mean of 2.84, and a standard deviation of 1.61.

Trust was measured by having participants rank the statements “I don’t trust environmental labels”, “I believe companies lie about their products’ environmental attributes”,

and “I trust that a product is sustainable if the advertisement says sustainable on it”. These had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .73, a mean of 2.87, and a standard deviation of 2.48.

After viewing the advertisements given, participants answered six questions to figure out their **attitudes** towards the brand on a five-point bipolar scale. This series of questions put together had a Cronbach’s Alpha of .85, making it reliable. The data had a mean of 3.19 and an average standard deviation of 1.013.

Purchasing intentions compiled five questions asking them to what extent they agreed with statements about likelihood, willingness, consideration, interest, and certainty about buying from Joyce’s Closet. The Cronbach’s Alpha was .93, making it highly reliable. The mean response was 2.91, and the average standard deviation was 1.17.

“GreenWnet” was a variable for the relative perception of greenwashing. It used the answers from the question “to what extent do you view this brand’s ad as greenwashing?” and subtracted the answers from “to what extent do you view this brand’s ad as green advertising?”. The higher score meant higher greenwashing perception.

The condition they identified the advertisement as was also used as a measure. The **identified condition** was a numeric variable where greenwashing, green advertising, and control were each assigned a different number.

Content Analysis Results

The goal of the content analysis was to compare and contrast how the advertising industry and the fashion industry discuss the topic of greenwashing and sustainability in fashion, as well as see if they propose solutions to the climate crisis.

Business of Fashion

The *Business of Fashion (BOF)* trade publication was founded in 2007 by Imran Amed with the purpose of letting people outside the fashion industry break through the barrier and learn more about the inside of the business. It is now a highly accredited publication with a global team reporting on all aspects of the fashion industry. The first part of the publication that stood out was “sustainability,” having its own tab in the header as well as a “marketing” tab. While this thesis centers around the idea of these two topics working in tandem and influencing each other, I could only find one article overlapping in these two locations. This was surprising, as many topics in the articles encompassed both ideas.

The one overlapping article was titled “The Decline and Fall of the Viral Microtrend” by Joan Kennedy. This piece shares that the once ever-evolving development of new microtrends, which take over the world one minute and then leave the next, is slowing down. This article was written in anticipation of TikTok being shut down, which would only decrease the popularity of microtrends and reduce overconsumption. While this TikTok ban lasted less than 24 hours, Kennedy did bring up another compelling point: consumers are experiencing fatigue. Fashion forecaster at WGSN, Mia Jacobs, explains in the article that consumers have “woken up to the reality of ‘here today and gone tomorrow’”. This might be seen as a win for sustainability and green clothing companies trying to entice consumers with styles not capitalizing on fleeting interests, but fatigue seems to be a commonality among shoppers in multiple sectors of fashion

(Kennedy, 2025). While microtrends are less of a concern in slow fashion companies, there is a lot of fatigue in the marketing department. Buyers are tired of values-driven advertisements because they feel like they are being told things they already know, and it feels performative. In addition, researchers have found that although young consumers claim that they prefer items ethically sourced, it is outranked by price and quality (Kent & Morris, 2025). Environmental attributes and sustainability can be the icing on the cake, but not the sole messaging for a product. This is also important when greenwashing has become such a common practice that environmental friendliness is no longer a competitive advantage (Kent, 2025)

The vagueness of claims and promises in greenwashing is now not only influencing consumer perceptions of products claiming to be cleaner for the environment, but also drawing scrutiny to the institutions backing up claims. Fast fashion companies like Princess Polly are breaking through B Corp Certifications, which brings up the question: Can these certifications be trusted? B Corp certification is a highly accredited certification that tells the world that the company is socially and environmentally responsible by testing it against the B Lab Standards. Companies following the fast fashion model, like Princess Polly, are still inflicting so much environmental harm, even with a “lower impact” section (Kent, 2025). Getting B Corp Certified only promotes their greenwashing more because it gives Princess Polly something to support their advertising, even though they received the lowest score in the customer section of their certification, specifically because of their unethical marketing practices.

Lastly, the *BOF* articles made sure to touch on the United States government's influence on clothing sustainability. Environmental protection in the clothing industry has been watered down by the Trump Administration, reversing regulations as well as implementing tariffs. Companies saw the decreased focus on environmental regulation from the government and

followed suit, dropping their sustainability goals. In addition, with the tariffs, brands' money must be reallocated, shifting it away from sustainability teams and ensuring ethical production (Pucker, 2025). The consensus of these articles in *Business of Fashion* was clear. Sustainability has more recently taken a back seat.

California Apparel News

California Apparel News (CAN) is a strong supplement to *Business of Fashion* by providing insight into what industry executives are thinking about in terms of how sustainability is shaping their companies. This publication was started in the 1940s, with its audience mainly consisting of clothing industry professionals across the supply chain. Within the “sustainable” tab of the website, there are many articles containing statements from people working in the sustainable fiber industry promoting their verification services, as well as providing a critique of current practices. Transparency was a highlighted theme across these articles as the cornerstone of environmental protection in brands (Crouch, 2025). However, no actionable ideas were offered.

Generation Z is said to be willing to pay more for ethical apparel. This attitude is pushing brands to embrace sustainability and provide authentic support to their claims, like using certifications. *CAN* noted that not every certification is equal and that using buzzwords disguised as certifications heavily contributes to greenwashing, which is a significant threat in the industry. Katrina Caspelich (Chief Marketing Officer of Remake) cited OEKO-TEX as reliable and stated that certifications are needed for traceability and transparency (Crouch, 2025).

Lastly, *CAN* also drew attention to recent tariffs set in place by the Trump Administration and asked executives for their opinions. While coming from different viewpoints, Tayfun Akbay (Chief Commercial Officer of ISKO) summarized their sentiments when saying, “Sustainability

doesn't have to take a back seat when the landscape gets complicated. If anything, it should be a stabilizing force''' (Crouch, 2025).

Fashion Trade Publications Comparison

The fashion trade publications provided insight into how the clothing industry is acknowledging climate change and environmental degradation. Both *Business of Fashion (BOF)* and *California Apparel News (CAN)* list greenwashing as a critical issue facing the fashion industry in particular. *BOF* describes how greenwashing is creating fatigue among consumers and raises questions about certifications. Textile and denim expert, Tricia Carey of FibreTrace, was interviewed by *CAN* and shared how greenwashing is the biggest threat also facing traceability technology in clothing (Crouch, 2025). Both publications are aligned about the damage inflicted by greenwashing, but their proposed solutions differ greatly. *California Apparel News* agreed that not all certifications are equal and encouraged caution to be used when navigating buzzwords. *CAN* then went on to promote a specific certification. On the other hand, *Business of Fashion* proposed an overhaul shift in how sustainable clothing is marketed. Consumers are done with sustainability terms and certifications being shoved down their throats. Adding another certification wouldn't seem as effective as letting sustainability take a back seat in advertisements. Being considerate of what turns shoppers off is incredibly important. As much as a certification can be beneficial to the environment, if consumers aren't interested, it doesn't make sense to broadcast that first.

BOF seemed to come from an unbiased point of view, interviewing experts and getting to the bottom of consumers' perception of the environment used as a tactic in selling clothes. *CAN*, however, interviewed company executives, giving them an opportunity to promote their own services. While putting more weight into *Business of Fashion's* articles, the consensus from both

is that the advertising of sustainable clothing products needs to be more transparent about the ethics of production and sourcing. Another agreement among the publications was to be careful not to promote products solely based on environmental factors and certifications.

Ad Age

Ad Age is a popular trade publication known across the advertising world. It caters to all sectors of the industry, making it harder to find relevant and recent articles in comparison to the fashion trade publications. In order to find the most relevant articles from the advertising trade publications, I searched the following keywords: “greenwashing”, “greenwash”, “sustainable”, “sustainability”, “clothing”, “fast fashion”, and “fashion”. I also looked in Brand Marketing’s Retail tab. There was one usable article from January 2025 to March 2026 that related to the topic of this thesis. From April 2021 to March 2024, there were 16 articles related to the topic. This tells us that sustainability in the clothing industry was treated as a trend by the advertising industry, according to *Ad Age*. This also reflects consumers' demand for sustainability, especially during the pandemic, which is now slowly decreasing. The one article from the studied time period was titled “How Coach Uses Marketing to Drive Growth with Gen Z and Maintain Loyalty with Older Shoppers” and discussed how green-based initiatives like Coachtopia (their circular sub-brand) were inspired by Generation Z’s passion for the environment in order to target a new consumer base (Pasquarelli, 2025). In this way, the green branding was effective because even if sustainability isn’t at the core of the parent brand, Coach, by making it the core of the spinoff brand, its efforts feel more authentic to Generation Z. This authenticity is less likely to feel like greenwashing because the sub-brand is oriented around the environment, and their advertisements are a reflection of that, not a false claim or exaggeration.

Although outside of the primary scope of the content analysis, I believe it is important to include some noteworthy previous *Ad Age* articles to show how consumers' prior push for environmental action shaped the ad industry. It can also help explain the steep drop-off in discussion. One article discussed how, between 2019 and 2021, there was a 52% decrease in brand Instagram posts using sustainability-related hashtags. The article titled “‘Green Hushing’ Explained—Why Brands are Cutting Back on Sustainability Marketing” shares the cutback in using the environment to sell. The article says that this happens because consumers sometimes lack trust in green claims, brands fear backlash from politically conservative shoppers, and sometimes they are unable to meet goals, so they aim low or don’t aim at all. The Global Chief Strategy Officer of VMLY&R, Andrea Grodberg, also theorized that there was less talk on the subject because companies were using their money to make more sustainable changes instead of marketing their sustainability efforts (Rittenhouse, 2022). This explains the rapid decline in environmental language in marketing on social media, as well as the decrease in green marketing covered in *Ad Age*. If customers are less receptive to it and advertisers have picked up on their cues to drop that tactic, trade publications will report on it less now and stunt the green marketing conversation. It relies on consumers trusting that the brand’s money is going towards sustainable changes instead of advertising because the vast majority of shoppers aren’t going to be searching for sustainability reports. As a result, greenwashing could be made even more believable in the future.

There were also a few articles covering Generation Z’s shopping patterns. One says that although many members of Generation Z claim to prefer shopping sustainably, price, quality, and style are given higher consideration compared to social and environmental issues (Johnson, 2023). This cognitive dissonance can also explain why advertising clothing purely based on

sustainability isn't encouraging people to buy items. A separate article also said a reason for this prioritization on price, demonstrated in buying dupes and from fast fashion companies, is simply because of financial struggles and inability to afford higher quality, sustainable items (Yohanan, 2024). Levi's tried to counter this obstacle by creating a campaign going after fast fashion companies, as well as attracting consumers hoping to shop less. They promoted the idea of customers wearing their Levi's jeans for as long as they can. This campaign showed off their items while also pushing underconsumption. By buying high-quality jeans like Levi's, consumers can spend less money in the long run on replacements and decrease their footprint (Sherwood, 2021). This could attract those same Generation Z shoppers who have hesitations about shopping sustainably because of the financial burden that normally accompanies it.

Lastly, in an article titled "Consumer Demand for Sustainable Packaging Increases Despite Inflation", a study is shared looking at what *Ad Age* refers to as "The Sustainability Generation" (Generation Z), and their opinions on the role of packaging in purchases. Within this generation, 90% of 18- to 24-year-olds are willing to pay more for green packaging. In addition, "the data in this year's Buying Green Report shows that consumers are seeking out more information than ever before to improve their understanding of eco-friendly packaging," according to Jenny Wassenaar, Trivium Packaging's Chief Sustainability Officer (Shahidullah, 2023). This brings up a unique, little-discussed aspect of sustainable clothing, the actual transportation and container of the product from business to consumer. This appears to be the biggest obstacle to sustainable shopping for 46% of study responders. In addition, in another article, it claimed that in a First Insight survey in 2019, 73% of participants were willing to pay 10% more for purchases that are environmentally friendly (Patton, 2023). Even if consumers aren't as open to hearing about sustainability in advertising, this demonstrates that the planet is

still very important to them when they shop. By creating a solution for this discrepancy of sustainable products and unsustainable packaging, it can encourage more people to push past passive shopping and actually make the purchase. Improving the sustainability aspects of packaging also signals to shoppers that this brand isn't greenwashing, and that they consider the environment in every stage of the product life cycle.

Adweek

Adweek is a similarly accredited trade publication that many advertising experts refer to. This publication, however, had a lot more recent articles relating to green advertising and greenwashing in the clothing industry. Similar to *Ad Age*, it was harder to find these articles. I used the same terms in the search bar as for *Ad Age* ("greenwashing", "greenwash", "sustainable", "sustainability", "clothing", "fast fashion", and "fashion").

One of the most compelling articles was sponsored content by Getty. Titled, "What If We Visualized—and Marketed—a Better Future?", Getty surveyed people to find their ideal imagery of sustainability in advertisements. Three-fourths of the participants preferred positive imagery highlighting hope instead of a grim view of the future if action isn't taken. They want to visualize a reality where everyone can thrive. This article also brought attention to a key point, which is, "unless sustainability is encoded into their DNA, brands often shy away from climate consciousness in their storytelling" (Norman, 2025). This gets to the root of the difference between greenwashing and green advertising, which is where sustainability falls in the brand's priorities and DNA. This also ties into another article specifically recognizing Generation Z's ability to spot when a brand is being inauthentic. This generation pushes advertisers to check before posting if their messaging is consistent throughout the brand or is staged for engagement, views, or false trust. While many environmental conversations are cautionary, shifting the

viewpoint to be more optimistic and authentic can engage a new group of consumers in sustainability. This can also result in action taken by consumers to support brands that are trying to create a healthier, more positive world.

Another article, sponsored by Marketing Architects, made an interesting point about targeting. “‘Reach’ Isn’t a Dirty Word—It’s How Brands Grow” discusses the dangers of over-targeting. It suggests that advertisers should widen their market instead of selecting a “hyper-specific persona” (Voss, 2025). This goes back to sustainability because if a product is only advertised to those already committed to an eco-friendly lifestyle, they are missing those willing to shift their purchasing habits, or even those not willing to switch, but are interested in said product.

Advertising Trade Publications Comparison

While based on the same industry, *Ad Age* and *Adweek* had vastly different takes on sustainability in fashion. Most of the information gathered from *Ad Age* came from 2021 to 2024, making one believe that this topic no longer holds weight in the advertising world, and sustainability might have been no more than a Covid-19 pandemic trend. *Adweek* showed that it is not accurate by publishing articles about new consumer visualization techniques, mindsets, trust, and agencies' reactions to sustainability.

Adweek shares many commonalities with the articles posted in previous years by *Ad Age*. One shared concept is that sustainability is becoming less of a priority. While *Ad Age* described the ongoing “Green Hushing”, *Adweek* talked about the end of AKQA Bloom in 2025 because of brands watering down their sustainability commitments and goals (Lundstrom, 2025). In this scenario, brands with sustainability in their DNA are backing away from agencies supporting more polluting brands and those that don’t share their drive to become more eco-friendly.

Both publications also discussed the rise in the second-hand market. *Ad Age* and *Adweek* both cited ThredUp as a site making sustainability more accessible to customers. Whereas *Ad Age* used it in their article about Generation Z lacking the financial resources to be sustainable (Yohanan, 2024), *Adweek* talked about the explosion of secondhand clothing and reselling. ThredUp reported that the resale market grew 14% with the last year, and it's now not just being advertised as sustainable but also community-oriented (Kiefer, 2025). By highlighting different aspects other than sustainability in sustainably centered business, consumers are able to make a connection and see how it can serve them, not just the environment.

Combined Analysis

Starting with the similarities between the two types of publications, both point out greenwashing as the key factor to fashion's influence on climate change. Within the fashion publications' sustainability tabs, many articles referenced greenwashing. *Business of Fashion* discussed its consequences on how consumers view green claims, and *California Apparel News* focused on the importance of transparency and how the lack of such contributes to greenwashing. Greenwashing was a common theme in the advertising publications when searching for similar key terms. *Ad Age* even cites a Harris Poll in which “almost 60% [of participants] said that their own companies overstate their environmental cred” (Johnson, 2023). *Adweek* had a similar take as the fashion publications, emphasizing the need for transparency to gain consumer trust against greenwashing. These articles invite readers to learn more about greenwashing effects and solutions, trusting the consumer's own knowledge of the word and its surrounding terms. Do consumers all have the same definition of greenwashing, and arguably more importantly, do the publications and industry leaders? These articles must be compared at face value despite an unrealistic expectation that everyone knows what greenwashing is. The

main difference in these discussions of greenwashing lies in accountability. The fashion publications acknowledge fashion's part in damaging the environment through greenwashing. Fast fashion is promoted through loose certifications, exaggerations, and lies that cater to consumers' every momentary want in the cycle of trends. The fashion publications also give an in-depth explanation of fashion's impact on climate change across production, use, and disposal. Accountability is clearly taken, and is easy to find in the fashion articles, along with potential remedies. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the advertising publications. Greenwashing is an advertising practice at its core. Yes, fashion does implement it, but it is a form of deceptive advertising. Neither of the advertising publications held advertising accountable for this problem, which is contributing to climate change. There wasn't even a critique of the greenwashing itself and how it is negatively impacting the environment and shoppers. While giving some ideas to move towards more honest advertising, the publications mainly just stated greenwashing's existence, with no plans to eradicate it or differentiate a truly green product from the fakes. Fashion can't be solely responsible for this practice since it shows up in many different industries, and although some companies might advertise honestly, it doesn't reach the level of prominence or importance to feature in these articles. If the advertising industry took more ownership, change could follow, especially if it was reported on more in these publications, which could allow advertisers to lead by example.

Another consensus from the articles was the ongoing watering down of sustainability. "Green" has less of a pull for consumers now than before. This could be from greenwashing, but it seems like other factors are at play. Fashion is viewing this pullback from green advertising as a response to the loss of the competitive advantage that eco-friendly terminology used to hold. Advertising is seeing it as a shift to allow companies to exceed low expectations, especially

under a government that doesn't prioritize regulations to protect the environment. Where environmentalism used to be central to marketing to assert superiority, as stated in an *Ad Age* article from 2021, priorities have clearly changed based on recent articles from the other publications, and that same publication almost dropping the topic completely. Nonetheless, both types of publications view the shift as conscious and intentional. All of them, except *California Apparel News*, even suggested that sustainability should take a back seat in marketing efforts right now because of consumers' current lack of interest. What used to excite consumers about a product is now turning them off. Is this just a trend that will cycle back to having consumers interested in sustainability, or is intervention needed to get consumers talking about the planet again? The articles left no clear answer to this, leaving uncertainty in how fashion and advertising should proceed in discussing sustainability.

Another key finding was the difference in the discussion of influencers. Social media influencers have become the new norm in advertising to sell almost everything. Once a person with a large following promotes a product to their audience, sales can increase exponentially. Not only do influencers affect product sales, but they can also affect followers' lifestyles and values. The fashion publications did not touch on this subject despite it being used every day to promote clothing. Influencer impact was referenced multiple times alongside sustainability in the advertising publications. *Ad Age* dedicated an entire article to demonstrating how influencers are being used to sell sustainability; "According to the survey, 78% of respondents said that influencers had the single biggest impact on their choices to be more environmentally friendly" (Wheless, 2023). Generation Z is positively responding to these influencers advertising sustainable living and purchasing. Can this be utilized by the fashion industry? Although not discussed in the trade publications, clothing is one of the most popular niches for influencer

marketing (Digital Marketing Institute, 2026). Although mainly used for fast fashion, this could be a persuasive tool to get people to purchase slower fashion and reorient their lifestyle around less consumption. This also ties into the transparency pushed in *California Apparel News* because Generation Z is viewing these influencers as trustworthy and open to critiquing products where they miss the mark in quality or ethics.

Finally, it has become necessary to mention the implications of the current United States administration on the environment. Donald Trump was reelected in 2024 and has since significantly decreased environmental regulation. Additionally, this administration put tariffs in place, making production abroad more expensive. All publications discussed what this means for fashion and advertising. With fewer regulations, companies are withdrawing their environmental goals. This is helping to filter out which companies were greenwashing in the past, but it is ultimately harming the environment because more unmonitored environmental degradation is free to proceed in the fashion industry. In addition, by making production abroad more expensive, less money is left to pursue sustainability endeavors. The discussed articles paint this picture: It is hard to stress the importance of sustainability in a country whose leader undervalues it. Without the country holding businesses accountable, it puts significant pressure on the consumer to investigate each purchase and set their own standard for companies they will support. The insights from the four publications are essential in informing the recommendations section.

Survey Results

Sample Description

The survey accumulated 112 results from November 24th, 2025, to April 7th, 2026. The average age was about 20.8 years old. 77% of the participants were also students. The sample was predominantly female (approximately 90%), with only nine male respondents, and one person who preferred not to say. Because of this, the data is skewed towards the female student perspective and may limit generalizability. However, despite the skew toward female students, a chi-square test showed that the three experimental groups were not significantly different in their gender representation ($\chi^2(4) = 4.33, p = .36$), meaning most people were able to correctly identify their group. In other words, all groups had similar gender representations.

The survey started by asking the participants about their current shopping habits. Ninety-one percent of participants had bought an item of clothing, shoes, or accessories within the past six months. The top three brands this group was buying from were Brandy Melville, Aritzia, and Abercrombie & Fitch. Ninety-one percent of people had seen sustainability being used as an advertising tactic, but only 51% had heard about greenwashing before.

Hypothesis 1 Results

Hypothesis 1a: Environmental Awareness, Environmental Consciousness, Trust, and Brand Attitude

To test Hypothesis 1a, a multiple linear regression was calculated to predict consumers' brand attitude based on their environmental awareness, environmental consciousness, and trust. The overall model was not significant ($F(3, 63) = .27, R^2 = .013, p = .85$), and none of the individual variables had a significant relationship with brand attitude. After controlling for trust

and environmental consciousness, environmental awareness had a coefficient of $-.055$ ($p = .74$). After controlling for trust and environmental awareness, environmental consciousness had a coefficient of $-.06$ ($p = .722$). After controlling for environmental consciousness and awareness, trust had a coefficient of $-.06$ ($p = .63$). This data would have supported my hypothesis if it were significant, because when these independent variables increased, brand attitude decreased; however, the results are not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 1b: Environmental Awareness, Environmental Consciousness, Trust in Green Brand Claims, and Purchase Intentions

To test Hypothesis 1b, a multiple linear regression was calculated to predict consumers' purchase intentions based on their environmental awareness, environmental consciousness, and trust. Similar to Hypothesis 1a, the overall model was not significant, $F(3, 60) = 1.83$, explaining 8.4% of the variance in purchase intentions ($R^2 = .084$, $p = .152$). Although still not statistically significant, it had a higher significance than brand attitude ($p = .152$ vs. $p = .849$). After controlling for the other two variables, trust was the only significant individual predictor ($b = .328$, $p = .047$). When trust increases by one point, purchasing intentions are predicted to increase by .328. Neither environmental consciousness nor environmental attitude was a significant predictor. After controlling for trust and environmental consciousness, environmental attitude did not significantly predict purchase intentions ($b = .264$, $p = .209$). Finally, after controlling for trust and environmental attitude, environmental consciousness had a coefficient of $-.03$ ($p = .895$). Thus, while Hypothesis 1b was not supported, trust showed a significant unique association with purchase intentions.

Hypothesis 2 Results

Hypothesis 2a: Consumers' Identification of Greenwashing vs. Green Advertising Ads

Immediately after seeing the definitions followed by the advertisements, participants determined which type of advertisement they saw. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the association between the advertising condition to which participants were assigned and whether they identified the condition as “greenwashing,” “green advertising,” or “neither” (for the control group). A significant relationship was found ($\chi^2(4) = 13.80, p = .008$), meaning most people were able to correctly identify their group, supporting Hypothesis 2a. Thus, most people were able to correctly identify their groups with .008 significance. Of the participants who saw the greenwashing ad, 54.5% identified it as greenwashing, 36.4% thought it was green advertising, and 9.1.% thought it was neither. The most common reason people believed the ads to be greenwashing was the vagueness of the ads. Of the participants who were exposed to the green advertisement, 58.3% identified it as green advertising, but 33.3% thought it was greenwashing, and 8.3% thought it was neither. In the control advertisements, 37.5% detected it as neither greenwashing nor green advertising, 40.6% thought it was greenwashing, and 21.9% thought it was green advertising. The control group was the only one that was identified correctly less than 50% of the time, which could possibly be explained by the previous questions being heavily focused on greenwashing, so they are more likely to assume the advertisement would be related to that. This supported Hypothesis 2a, because the majority of participants correctly identified the condition for greenwashing and green advertising. It was also statistically significant.

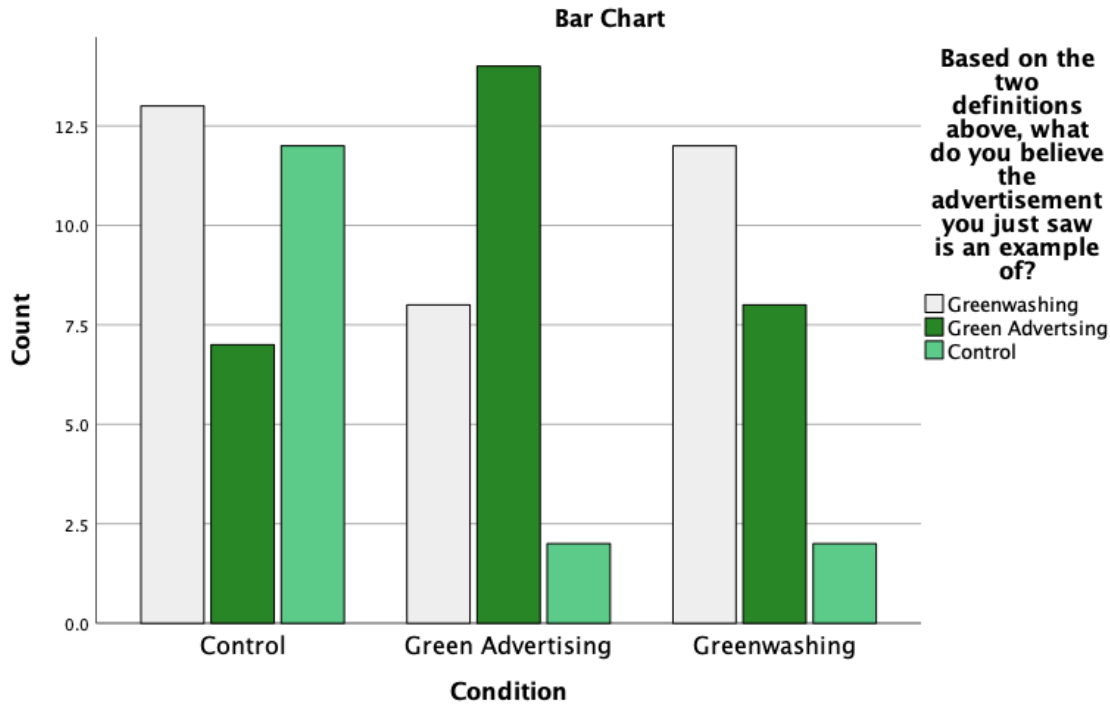


Figure 2: Perceptions of Advertisements Shown

A bar chart showing what people perceived the advertisement they saw was (key on the right-hand side) and what condition they received (x-axis).

Hypothesis 2b: Ad Exposure Effects on Greenwashing Perception

To test Hypothesis 2b, a one-way ANOVA was computed to compare greenwashing perception among the three experimental groups. Although consumers in the green advertising condition reported lower greenwashing perceptions ($M = -.5$, $SD = 1.53$) than greenwashing ($M = .14$, $SD = 1.32$) and the control group ($M = .33$, $SD = 1.16$), the differences were not statistically significant ($F(2, 72) = 2.76$, $p = .070$). Because of this, Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Although not statistically significant, green advertising was still perceived as greenwashing less, and the pattern aligns with the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2c: Effect of Identified Condition on Greenwashing Perception

To test Hypothesis 2c, a one-way ANOVA was computed to compare greenwashing perceptions among consumers based on whether they identified the condition as greenwashing, green advertising, or neither. A significant difference was found among the three identified groups ($F(2, 72) = 15.05, p < .001$). Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences between how the advertisement was identified. This analysis revealed that participants who identified the ad as a green advertisement reported lower relative greenwashing perception ($M = -.86, SD = 1.38$) than participants who had identified greenwashing ($M = .77, SD = 1.12$) and students who identified the control ($M = .13, SD = .64$). This supported Hypothesis 2c.

Hypothesis 3 Results

Hypothesis 3a: Greenwashing vs. Green Advertising Effects on Brand Attitudes

To test Hypothesis 3a, a one-way ANOVA was computed to compare the brand attitudes of participants who identified their advertisements as greenwashing, green advertising, or neither. A significant difference was found among the three ads ($F(2, 64) = 4.99, p = .01$). Tukey's HSD was used to determine the nature of the differences between the three advertisements. This analysis revealed that participants who had green advertising reported higher brand attitudes ($M = 3.53, SD = .62$) than greenwashing ($M = 3.06, SD = .77$) and the control ($M = 2.83, SD = .80$). Hypothesis 3a was supported.

Hypothesis 3b: Greenwashing vs. Green Advertising Effects on Purchasing Intentions

To test Hypothesis 3b, a one-way ANOVA was computed to compare the purchasing intentions of participants who identified their advertisements as greenwashing, green advertising,

or neither. Although consumers who identified green advertising reported higher purchasing intentions ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .93$) than greenwashing ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.05$) and the control group ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.11$), the differences was not statistically significant ($F(2, 61) = 1.67$, $p = .20$). Thus, while the purchasing intentions followed the expected patterns, the association was not statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 Results

Hypothesis 4a: Relative Greenwashing Perception and Brand Attitude

To test Hypothesis 4a, a linear regression was conducted to assess whether ads perceived more as greenwashing than green advertising (operationalized as perceived greenwashing minus perceived green advertising) predicted less favorable brand attitude. The overall model was significant ($F(1, 61) = 11.17$, $p = .001$, with an R^2 of .15). Higher perceived relative greenwashing was associated with less favorable brand attitudes ($b = -.38$, $p = .001$). For every one-unit increase in perceiving the ad more as greenwashing rather than green advertising, brand attitude decreased by about 0.38 points. These results supported Hypothesis 4a.

Hypothesis 4b: Relative Greenwashing Perception and Purchase Intention

The last hypothesis was analyzed using the same linear regression model and variables, except purchase intentions were put in place for brand attitude. Similar to H4a, a significant association was found between the extent to which participants viewed the ads as greenwashing or green advertising and purchasing intentions ($F(1, 61) = 6.19$, $p = .016$, $R^2 = .094$, $p < .001$). The extent to which the ad was perceived as relatively greenwashing had a very strong positive association with purchasing intentions. Higher relative greenwashing perception was associated with lower purchasing intentions ($b = -.03$, $p = .016$). For every one-unit increase in perceiving

the ad more as greenwashing rather than green advertising, purchase intentions decreased by about 0.03 points. Hypothesis 4b was supported by this analysis.

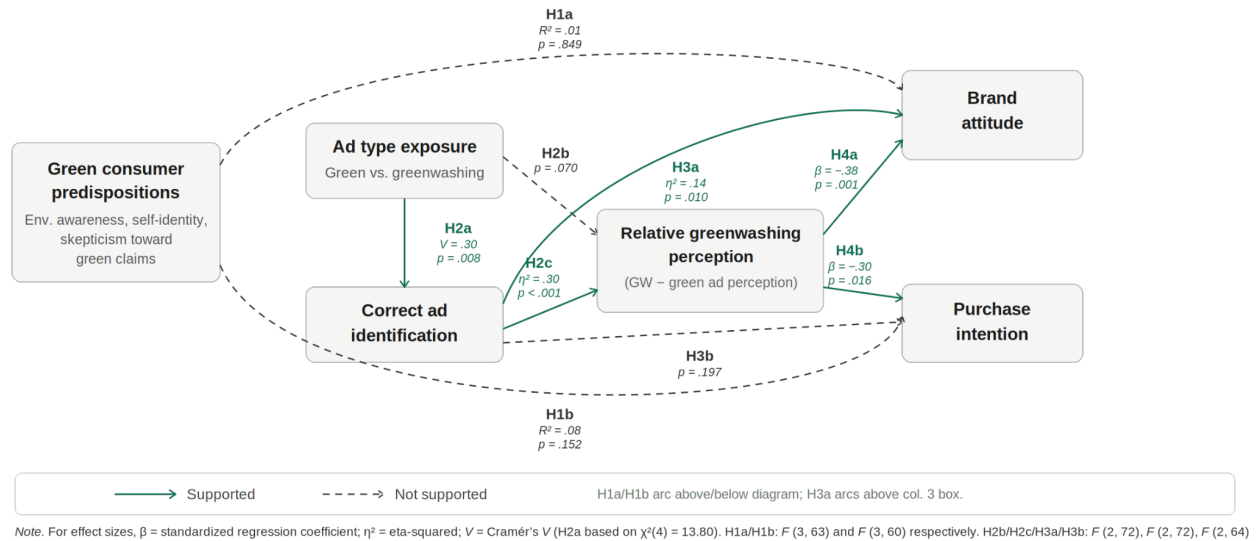


Figure 3: Hypotheses Results

A visual representation of which hypotheses were supported, along with their significance and coefficients.

Discussion

Using a content analysis of two fashion and two advertising trade publications, as well as a three-group randomized experiment, this study examined how people in the industry and consumers view greenwashing and its effects. The results of the content analysis suggest that sustainability should not always be the focal point for advertising because it can turn consumers off of the product or brand entirely. Instead, it should be used as an added bonus once customers are already interested. This finding runs contrary to Harris et al.'s (2016) study, which, based on key informant interviews, found that the fashion industry, especially sustainable brands, should be more vocal about its sustainability because a lot of other brands are harming the environment with their textiles. This difference could be from the fact that the trade publications were getting their insight from consumers as opposed to people in the industry. Their study had the most similar findings to *California Apparel News*, which also got its information from industry professionals. This explains how the discrepancy in suggestions is based on the source of the information. The findings from the content analysis build on this literature by offering the viewpoint of the consumer as well as a supplemental viewpoint of the producers (*CAN*), which is essential to consider in advertising.

Results from the experiment found some discrepancies and similarities between my data and the literature. The data from the survey did not support Hypothesis 3b. While the effect of the green advertisement (as opposed to the greenwashing advertisement and the control group) on purchase intentions was trending in the expected positive direction, it did not reach statistical significance. This finding differs from the findings by Alamsyah and Syarifuddin (2018). In their study, green brand image had a direct correlation to an increase in purchasing intentions. This contrast may have been because of the difference in the types of items (clothing versus

groceries), the earlier discussion of greenwashing in my survey, or the difference in demographics (Generation Z compared to all shoppers). This is also likely due to the small sample size in this study. Future studies would benefit from increased participation.

Another finding that was interesting to compare to the literature review was the results of Hypothesis 1b. While the results followed the expected pattern, that with higher environmental awareness, environmental consciousness, and reluctance to trust, purchasing intentions decreased, the result was not statistically significant. This aligns with a study by Zhang (2021), which found that awareness was inversely related to knowledge of fast fashion and thus influenced consumption decisions. This comparison is especially intriguing because it combines the findings from participants in the United Kingdom with those in the United States. Consumers in these two countries share a similar relationship with fast fashion, which makes the results of this study more generalizable to a broader population beyond the U.S.

Many of the study hypotheses were not comparable to those found in the literature review, indicating the thesis's significant contribution to the literature. This leaves the door open for more studies testing similar hypotheses and seeing if they are further supported or rejected. The work builds on previous literature because it provides a more niche insight, looking specifically at the fashion industry, among consumers aged 18 to 25 in the United States. The study's findings add value to the current conversation because it combines three points of the clothing cycle into one study. It looks at the creation of the clothing (fashion industry), the marketing of the product (advertising industry), and then where the item ends up (consumer insight from the survey). This unique look at multiple stakeholders in these interconnected industries helps inform recommendations expanding on preexisting studies in the field.

Recommendations

The value of this study lies in addressing the subject of greenwashing and green advertising in a way that gives actionable recommendations to both industries and consumers.

Industry Recommendations

The first recommendation for the fashion and advertising industries that came from this study is to get on the same page about general discourse on fast fashion, greenwashing, and sustainability. Both industries have huge gaps in knowledge that could be easily filled by the other. One example is the use of influencers to help or hinder sustainability in the fashion industry. I recommend fashion publications addressing this, as well as people in the fashion industry considering this to promote lifestyle change, not just push products.

The second recommendation to come from the content analysis is for the advertising industry to take some accountability for the widespread implementation of greenwashing. As an advertising practice, advertisers are partially responsible for finding solutions to this detrimental problem. Avoiding critiquing it and not offering solutions is irresponsible. Without regulations or watchdogs, it is up to the industry themselves to take action, and trade publications will then feel obligated to report on it. On the other hand, the fashion industry can learn from the advertising industry's neutral take. Instead of promoting new certifications and products within articles, it would be beneficial to report current fashion and greenwashing events from an unbiased perspective.

Another suggestion is intervention. With a large number of people who took the survey not knowing what greenwashing is, it could be beneficial to provide education to them. This is a less common take on sustainability advertising and could make consumers understand the advantages of buying from sustainable brands, as well as provide helpful tools to consumers as

they continue to navigate a time of excessive misinformation. Because of the definitions provided in the survey, participants left more informed than they previously were. If education is continuously implemented by green brands, consumers might be more trusting of the brand, as well as make more sustainable choices when purchasing.

The main recommendation from the content analysis, which was later supported by the survey, is not to focus advertising on sustainability. With the influx of greenwashing, consumers are growing skeptical of what they can and can't trust. They are also growing tired of advertisements only boasting sustainability features when it is no longer seen as a competitive advantage. While it might look like taking a step backward, not focusing on sustainability in advertising might be the best step forward. With little regulation keeping greenwashing in check, it is hard for genuine sustainable brands to compete only on the basis of being environmentally friendly. Fashion advertisers should be focusing advertising efforts on the clothing itself, the quality, the price, the fit, the comfort, etc., and have sustainability serve as the cherry on top after getting the shopper interested. This also engages more shoppers by not narrowing the scope of the advertisements to just sustainability lovers. This targets a wider audience of anyone who could like the product, and sustainability can be the tipping point for those who place value on the environment. While a key part of a genuinely sustainable brand is having sustainability be part of the core of the company, it doesn't need to be brought up in every messaging the company produces. If the company is helping the environment, the branding and sustainability should become almost synonymous. This does not mean that sustainability should take the back seat in the company's operations, though. Companies should still pursue their sustainability goals, release annual reports, and keep the environment an integral part of every brand decision, but it just doesn't have to be the main focus of all advertisements.

Although the survey results did find that more than half of the sample could correctly categorize which advertising was greenwashing and which was green advertising, this doesn't consider possible guessing or the fact that it was just barely over 50% who navigated the advertisements correctly. By continuing to put out ads that could be mistaken as greenwashing, this could harm sales and further contribute to the sustainability fatigue discourse. While perceptions of green advertisements did increase purchasing intentions and brand attitude, they controlled such a small percentage and, if mistaken for greenwashing, could have the inverse effect.

Could sustainability-focused clothing marketing come back and be beneficial in the future? At this point, it is hard to tell, but to get there, a break must occur. Companies should evaluate their priorities and see if sustainability is really in their DNA if it isn't the advertising focus. While pushing full force on green initiatives internally, consumers will see this, and the purchasing intentions will reflect that. In addition, if sustainable brands are taking a step back, greenwashing may follow suit. As green fatigue lessens, "green hushing" can lessen, and the sustainability-focused advertisements can test the waters on returning with new goals and, in a perfect world, stricter certifications and reports to back it.

Consumer Recommendations

The main recommendation from this study to consumers is to do your research. The survey results found that 63% of the sample group rarely researches the sustainability practices of the brand before making a purchase. This is exactly how fast fashion companies can mislead shoppers. Although many claims from these companies can be easily debunked with a look into the practices of the brand, many people don't take the time to see what they are giving money to and take the advertisements at face value. On the opposite side, if consumers are skeptical of all

claims and don't take time to research brands that are trying to decrease their environmental footprint, shoppers may miss out on an easy way to clean up their impact. This unintentionally supports fast fashion and greenwashing by looping these two types of companies into the same category. It is understandable that you might not want to take time to do a deep dive into every brand every time you want to shop, which is why there are databases out there that rate brands' sustainability that I recommend looking into.

The second recommendation is to stay vigilant. The content analysis and survey both demonstrated how easy it is for consumers to get tricked by greenwashing. Having an understanding that not all ecolabels are the same and eco claims can just be that, claims without substance. Remembering the seven sins of greenwashing can help consumers detect which brands not to trust.

Another recommendation is to shop for quality and longevity. As the Levi's ad pointed out, and the other publications supported, if you buy higher quality, you are saving money in the long term and eliminating waste. On a similar note, try not to cave into microtrends. Every publication pointed out how detrimental purchasing these clothing items with perceived obsolescence is for the environment. This requires a shift in mindset and thinking about the practicality and likelihood of you continuing to get use out of these clothing items for years to come.

Lastly, hold companies accountable. If you notice greenwashing, point it out. While the United States is not a country where companies are facing consequences for unethical practices, Generation Z is referred to as "The Sustainability Generation" for a reason. Voting with your dollar can make a difference. By deciding not to shop from companies promoting greenwashed items and companies you don't see as ethical, you are making a statement about what you can

and cannot tolerate. This can encourage companies to change. Don't let companies take advantage of you. Be aware of what your money is supporting and decide if it aligns with your values.

Conclusion

This thesis set out with the goal to look closely at Generation Z's shopping habits and attitudes as it relates to greenwashing and green advertising in the clothing industry. This study took on a mixed-methods approach. In the secondary research portion, this study highlighted a knowledge gap between the advertising and clothing industry. The content analysis helped bridge that gap. The research found that greenwashing and fast fashion are not slowing down and instead are starting to infiltrate certifications to further confuse consumers. Transparency is essential at this time, as is a quieter, continued push towards sustainability goals. The survey gathered firsthand information from Generation Z consumers who are forced to navigate greenwashing advertisements daily. The majority of participants were able to correctly identify the conditions of the advertisement being shown, and even their purchasing intentions and brand attitude reflected that. Because of the green gap, brand attitude showed a more significant shift based on perceiving greenwashing ads or green advertisements.

These findings were important because in a time of rapid global warming, people need to find ways to make a change in their lifestyle. This could be as easy as switching where you buy clothes. It is up to advertisers to present these options to consumers, and how they go about it is even more important. Generation Z is environmentally conscious, but also skeptical, so it is important to understand what makes them perceive an advertisement as greenwashing versus green advertising and how much that really affects their relationship with that brand. These findings were also important because they showed how the fashion industry and advertising industry can work better together and learn from each other.

This study was not without limitations. One limitation was the number of fashion and trade publications that weren't taken into account. They could have offered different perspectives

or strengthened the ones used. In addition, most of the articles used from Ad Age were from before the selected time period, which created some discrepancies between the advertising publications. Another limitation and margin of error that needs to be addressed lies in the surveys. Many problems arose in the creation and distribution of the survey. The goal was to get at least 384 participants to account for a 5% margin of error within a large population. This did not happen, and because of that, the results are less generalizable. Additionally, many responses had to be thrown away due to errors in the software used that didn't record answers. Finally, this sample represented mainly women who were college-educated. This does not account for a large percentage of Generation Z. More groups being represented within the target would have made the survey results stronger.

This study could be taken and expanded on in many different ways in the future. There could be a follow-up study to see if people are becoming more aware of greenwashing after being exposed to it in the survey. There can also be further research on the impacts of social media on clothing advertisements, as well as AI, as it becomes more popular, and how that impacts greenwashing. Additionally, there can be further research into the next generation, Generation Alpha (born between 2013 and 2025), as they start shopping, and if their preferences are similar to Generation Z in terms of sustainability. Because greenwashing and an emphasis on sustainability in fashion are newer topics, there are endless possibilities for future studies and ways for both brands and consumers to learn and grow.

Appendices

Appendix A - Sustainable Advertisement / Green Advertisement



Appendix B - Greenwashing Advertisement



Appendix C - Control Advertisement



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