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UNDERSTANDING THE CONSUMER RESPONSES TO GREENWASHING IN FAST-FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to explore how consumers perceive and respond to greenwashing, specifically focusing on its impact on their purchasing behaviors and emotional reactions. Additionally, the study aims to examine how the ecological image of a product's country of origin influences consumer evaluations of greenwashing practices. In this context, the research analyzed Youtube comments of consumers based on 2 cases and integrated the outcomes of this analysis with the insights gathered from focus group study to understand the deeper connections between greenwashing, consumer responses, and country-of-origin effects. Finally, the findings of this study highlights that consumers' perceptions of greenwashing lead to negative purchase intention, green consumer confusion, loss of trust, and altered purchase behavior such as shifting to second-hand stores or competitors. It is also evident that negative emotions are generated, although not intensely expressed. On the other hand, COO ecological image is not directly associated with greenwashing, but rather focuses on regional differences.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Sustainability, Fast-Fashion, Consumer Responses

Introduction

Companies are aware of the growing interest of consumers in sustainable products, packaging, and practices, and the increasing demand for product safety, toxicity, and recyclability has led companies to make significant investments in sustainable practices and green marketing (Iannuzzi, 2024). Green marketing activities are carried out to satisfy the needs and wants of environmentally aware customers and meet new consumer expectations by producing environmentally friendly products and services. (Nekmahmud & Fekete-Farkas, 2020; Gelderman et al., 2021). Green marketing is a tool for companies in order to position themselves better in the market and to add to the trust of the client surrounding the brand (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Thus, most businesses use green marketing terms in their promotional activities (Malinauskaite et al., 2020; Sumrin et al., 2021; Zorpas, 2020). A firm's marketing communications to consumers represent an important factor in shaping consumer attitudes toward the legitimacy of a company's environmental claims (Wang et al., 2021). However, it is essential to make a distinction between authentically sustainable practices and misleading green initiatives within the realm of green marketing, the latter of

The list of publications can be downloaded on the following website: https://www.ijhsdr.com/

which often seek to exploit perceived environmental benefits for competitive advantage. Greenwashing is defined as the deliberately disingenuous manipulation of environmental benefit and impact concern to lend a company or its offering an environmentally superior profile, attempting to create consumer goodwill for the brand or its products and services (Cao et al., 2022). Greenwashing involves emphasizing a single positive practice or a minor aspect of a company's activities while concealing the broader negative environmental impacts, thereby creating a misleading impression of being more sustainable than it actually is (Generation Climate Europe, 2021). Since greenwashing diminishes the effectiveness of genuinely responsible corporate behavior and compromises its extent, the question of what consumers think of the organization's legitimacy has considerable significance (Kudłak, 2024). The emotional reactions elicited by greenwashing practices warrant significant attention. Research indicates that the detection of greenwashing can provoke emotional responses such as distrust, disappointment, and frustration among consumers (Chen & Chang, 2013). These emotions not only impact individual consumer relationships but can also lead to broader reputational damage for companies, affecting their long-term viability in the market.

The customers' trust, along with the use of brands, vision, knowledge, thinking, and sensations, can have repercussions for their beliefs and will become much more negative (Bigné et al., 2023). The existing literature states that customer perceptions of greenwashing predict decreased degrees of trust and consequently influence brand capital in a detrimental manner (Ha et al., 2022; Uitslag, 2024). Hence, understanding the influence of greenwashing on purchasing behavior is vital. Consumers who perceive a brand as engaging in greenwashing may change their purchasing choices, opting for competitors perceived as more genuine in their sustainability efforts (Testa et al., 2011). On the other hand, assessing the origin of a product provides insights into the social, geographical, cultural, and economic factors influencing consumer behavior (Trentinaglia et al., 2020). In today's era of globalization, awareness of a product's origin offers consumers more comprehensive information than ever before. Consumers increasingly consider global ethical issues, such as labor conditions and environmental practices, to discern the country of origin (COO) of a product (Bhattacharya et al., 2023). These communicated social representations enable consumers to draw inferences about the products. Consequently, the characterization of a product's COO – whether positive or negative – can significantly impact consumers' assessments, especially in the context of greenwashing marketing strategies (Xiao & Myers, 2022).

In summary, it should be highlighted that the investigation into how consumers perceive and respond to greenwashing is critical for understanding its effects on purchasing behavior. Furthermore, examining the influence of a product's country of origin provides essential insights into consumer evaluations of environmental claims, emphasizing the strategic importance of aligning marketing practices with genuine sustainability efforts. Research on consumer behavior, particularly in relation to greenwashing and the COO, remains sparse and requires further development (Martínez et al., 2020). Drawing on this, the primary aim of this study is to investigate consumers' perceptions of and reactions to greenwashing. Pertaining to this objective the current study seeks (1) to elucidate how consumers conceptualize the notion of greenwashing (2) to determine consumers' perceptions and responses regarding greenwashing

(3) to comprehend how the ecological image of a product's COO impacts consumer assessments of greenwashing practices.

The subsequent sections provide a review of recent studies on greenwashing, the country-of-origin ecological image, consumer responses, and the fast fashion industry. Following this, the research methods employed in two studies are detailed, and the findings are systematically presented using content analysis. The article concludes with a discussion on consumer reactions to greenwashing within the fast fashion sector.

Background

Definition of Greenwashing

Environmental issues have started to receive significantly more attention in recent years, and this has caused society to scrutinize the actions of many profit and non-profit organizations with relation to the environment. Stakeholders such as governments, investors, consumers are increasingly conscious of environmental consideration because of the growing number of environmental crises, and they are creating pressure on companies specifically over the last ten years to provide real, manipulation-free information about their environmental performance (Kim and Lyon, 2015). Additionally, as greenwashing litigation evolves, companies confront heightened scrutiny and legal concerns across multiple platforms, including product claims and carbon neutrality assertions (Runyon, 2024). So, the term "greenwashing" which is described as "the act or practice of making a product, policy, activity, etc. appear to be more environmentally friendly or less environmentally damaging than it really is'' (Merriam-Webster, 2024) has been the subject of interest among academics (Santos, et al. 2024).

The origin of greenwashing dates back to 1986, when environmental activist Jay Westerveld published an essay on a hotel's promotional campaign that claimed towel reuse was part of its environmental corporate plan (Becker-Olsen and Potucek, 2013) and recognition and dissemination of the term increased during the late 1990s (Greer & Bruno, 1997). Walker and Wan (2012) define greenwashing as the difference between "symbolic" and "substantive" corporate social actions. Additionally, Delmas and Burbano (2011, 66) define greenwashing as "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of organizations (firm-level greenwashing) or the environmental benefits of a product or service (productlevel greenwashing)". The debate on what constitutes greenwashing is ongoing. The scope of potential greenwashing activities is much broader than suggested by lists such as TerraChoice's (2010) "seven sins of greenwashing (The sin of (1) the hidden trade-off; (2) no proof; (3) vagueness; (4) irrelevance; (5) the lesser of two evils; (6) fibbing; (7) worshiping false labels)". For example, two main types of greenwashing, namely decoupling and attention deflection, highlighted in the study of Siano et al. (2017). According to their study, decoupling occurs when firms try to meet stakeholders' environmental expectations without essentially changing their structure and behaviors. It usually happens when a corporation promotes ambitious sustainable projects without forming an effective sustainability department (structures/activities disconnection) or without enough resources to meet the desired corporate goals (means/ends disconnection). On the other hand, attention deflection consists of symbolic

actions meant to draw stakeholders' focus away from immoral business activities. Moreover, Demas and Burbano (2011) define the firms that communicate positively about their poor environmental performance as greenwashing organizations, while organizations that have poor environmental performance and do not communicate at all about their environmental performance as silent brown organizations .

Greenwashing and Country-of-Origin Ecological Image

Since 1962, when Dichter wrote in the Harvard Business Review that a product's COO can have "an enormous impact on the acceptance and success of products," numerous studies have analyzed the impact of COO and proved that COO has a significant impact on customers' decision-making process and product evaluation (Diamantopoulos et al., 2020). If customers have a positive attitude towards the COO of the product, they are likely to transfer this attitude to the product. Recent empirical studies suggest that about half of consumers are likely to respond to country-of-origin (COO) cues when making purchasing decisions (Herz and Diamantopoulos, 2017). When used in the field of green marketing, this term refers to the concept of the ecological image of the COO. Although the COO construct is one of the most researched constructs in international marketing, only a few studies have elaborated a country's ecological image and its influence on consumer perception of a product (Xiao and Myers, 2022). There is evidence that when a country has a strong ecological image, products from these countries are assumed to be more environmentally friendly (Dekhili and Achabou, 2015). Although the country of origin (COO) is linked to ecological image and environmentally friendly purchasing behavior (e.g., Thøgersen & Pedersen, 2021), no studies, to the best of the authors' knowledge, have examined its role in shaping perceptions of greenwashing. Consequently, to address this gap, the COO ecological image construct has been incorporated into this research.

Consumer Responses to Greenwashing

Multiple factors shape consumers' behavioral and emotional responses to greenwashing, a phenomenon that can be analyzed through the lens of psychological contract theory. This framework elucidates how greenwashing can lead to detrimental attitudes among consumers towards responsible corporations (Hung & Chang, 2024; Ibrahim Nnindini & Dankwah, 2024). Individual predispositions, beliefs, values, norms, and prior knowledge regarding environmental issues significantly influence the extent to which consumers are affected by greenwashing (Bladt et al., 2024). Greenwashing, which involves companies creating a misleading impression of their environmental practices, often triggers negative emotional responses among consumers (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Such emotions can include feelings of outrage, anger, irritation, frustration, disappointment, and anxiety (Pabon, 2023). These negative emotions are significant because they can influence consumer behavior in several ways. Firstly, they can lead to reduced trust in not only the specific brands involved in greenwashing but also in the broader marketplace, as consumers may become skeptical of other environmental claims (Chen & Chang, 2013). Secondly, negative affective responses can decrease consumer loyalty

and deter future purchases from the offending brands, as trust is a critical component in the consumer-brand relationship (Laufer, 2003). Thus, the affective dimension is pivotal in understanding consumer reactions to greenwashing, as it underscores the psychological and behavioral impacts of such deceptive practices.

Liao (2024) investigates the relationship between greenwashing and purchase intention, revealing that consumers' perceptions of greenwashing in a specific electric vehicle brand negatively influence their purchase intentions toward other brands. This detrimental effect is mediated by a general skepticism towards environmental claims in the industry. Furthermore, findings from Bladt et al. (2024) suggest that perceptions of greenwashing can substantially harm both current and potential customers' brand attitudes, thereby leading to adverse consequences for brand image and sales. In the green industry, consumer resistance to greenwashing perceptions varies based on their brand attitudes. Consumers with strong brand attitudes are better equipped to withstand the negative effects of greenwashing perceptions on their purchasing behavior compared to those with weaker brand attitudes (Wang et al., 2020). Notably, ambiguous claims do not enhance consumers' perceptions of greenwashing. In contrast, false claims can severely damage consumers' attitudes towards the associated advertisements and brands (Schmuck et al., 2018). From a behavioral perspective, the impact of deceptive marketing claims on consumers directly leads to a range of tangible reactions.

Additionally, green trust, defined as the willingness to depend on a product or service based on beliefs or expectations rooted in its credibility, benevolence, and competence regarding environmental performance (Chen, 2010), is positively linked to green repurchase intention (Lam et al., 2016). Chen and Chang (2013) demonstrate that greenwashing negatively impacts green trust, with their study revealing that green consumer confusion and perceived risk mediate the adverse relationship between greenwashing and green trust. Additionally, Aji and Sutikno (2015) found that switching intention is a consequence of green trust.

Greenwashing and Fast Fashion

The apparel and textile industry contributes millions of employment and US$1.5 trillion in revenue to both local and global economies. The fashion apparel industry continues to be transformed significantly, driven by global changes and technological advancements, allowing suppliers to expand into new markets and reduce production costs. This shift has led to the rise of fast fashion, with companies doubling production compared to the 1990s and adopting rapid design cycles to meet consumer demand. However, this accelerated production has brought substantial environmental costs. The UN Environmental Programme (2023) has dramatic statistics. Every year, the textile industry contributes 2-8% of the world's greenhouse emissions, consumes the equivalent of 86 million Olympic-sized swimming pools of natural water resources, and accounts for 9% of microplastic contamination in our oceans. Furthermore, the value chain has significant social consequences, putting textile workers at risk of exploitation, underpayment. In the textile industry, fast fashion accounts for around half of the fashion industry's emissions and this sub-sector is particularly detrimental due to fragmented supply networks, the use of synthetic materials, and chronic overproduction (Wren, 2022).

Today, there is a growing demand for environmentally friendly products and a corresponding increase in companies' communication efforts around environmental awareness. Consumers want businesses to follow ethical business practices and demand greater transparency from companies and thus, this has led to the growth of "greenwashing," as businesses try to appeal to customers while maintaining their competitiveness (Torelli et al., 2019). It's common for the fashion and textile industries to engage in greenwashing due to the same reason. For example, Fast fashion retailers like H&M and others often refer to their eco-friendly lines by broad terms, such as JoinLife by Zara, Committed by Mango, and Conscious by H&M. Additionally, H&M's *Conscious Collection* has been criticized for lacking transparency regarding its sustainability claims. In 2019, the Norwegian Consumer Authority noted that H&M did not provide enough information about the actual sustainability level of the collection (Kaner, 2021) H&M has also faced criticism for promoting a cycle of consumption, rather than encouraging consumers to maintain and care for the clothes they already own. As well, Chinese online fast fashion giant Shein is also under investigation by the Italian Competition Authority for potentially making misleading claims about its sustainability practices (Hadero, 2024). While the number of news articles about greenwashing in traditional media and social media has been increasing, there are also studies in the literature that also address the issue of greenwashing from the consumer perspective related to the fashion industry. For example, according to Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al. (2024), consumers who are more concerned and aware of sustainability are more sensitive to perceiving the sustainable communication of fast-fashion brands as greenwashing. Additionally, study of Costa Policarpo et al. (2023) reveals that cynical individuals are more likely to perceive companies' sustainability engagement as greenwashing, which in turn decreases their trust toward clothing brands. Another study by Apaolaza et al. (2023) supports the idea that when consumers perceive green product claims as vague or seemingly unlikely, it leads to doubts about the marketing information. This suspicion that the company is greenwashing negatively impacts their purchasing behavior in the sustainable fashion industry. Although there are some studies as indicated in the literature review, previous research on greenwashing in the case of the fast fashion industry is very limited.

Research methodology

A recent systematic review of consumer behavior in sustainable fashion (Busalim et al., 2022) identified limited use of qualitative methodologies despite a strong emphasis on quantitative approaches. Since this study aims to grasp the meanings behind consumers' behavior and to explore and understand their perceptions and evaluations, qualitative research seems to be the most appropriate approach (Silverman, 1998). Thus two studies were applied as part of an exploratory approach to understand how consumers evaluate the companies' greenwashing cases. While the first study examined Youtube comments on greenwashing through 2 company case studies, a focus group was conducted in the second study in the same context to delve deeper into consumer perceptions and validate the findings from YouTube comments.

Study 1. Analysis of YouTube Comments

In the context of the first study, this study analyzed comments scraped from YouTube related to true greenwashing cases to investigate the perceptions and sentiments of the YouTube audiences. Since this study aims to see consumer responses to greenwashing as well as the impact of COO ecological image, the research focused on Hennes & Mauritz AB (H&M) and Shein brands, inspired by two recent real cases in the fast fashion industry. These brands were specifically chosen because they represent both high and low levels of country-of-origin (COO) ecological image and have recently been the subject of greenwashing investigations in various countries. H&M has Swedish origin and its headquarters being in Stockholm, Sweden and it is a significant representative for one of the nations with a strong ecological image. However, SHEIN was established in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its headquarters are in Singapore and it is associated with the negative COO ecological image Comprehensive study of Greenmatch (2024) analyzing the most and least green countries globally support this brand-country selection.

First of all, videos linking these brands with greenwashing were searched on Youtube with the following keywords: search 1: "greenwashing" and "H&M" and search 2: "greenwashing" and "Shein". The filter tool was used to select and rank videos in decreasing order based on relevancy. The relevancy of YouTube video content about greenwashing and selected brands, the number of views on each video, and the number of comments created by commentators were used to choose videos for this study. The comments are listed using Microsoft Excel program, and any comments made in response to the initial comment and repeated comments are omitted to enhance the credibility of the research. Excluding unrelated 289 comments, there are a total of 500 comments listed for content analysis (323 for H&M Case and 177 for Shein Case) (Table 1).

Table 1: The Most Watched YouTube Videos Based on Specific Terms Chosen

URL	The Author	Title	Number of Views	The Number of Comments	The Date of Extraction
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00NIQgQE_d4&t=618s	DW Planet A (653K Followers)	H&M and Zara: Can fast fashion be eco-friendly?	644.609	517	30.06.2024 - 20.06
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nDiGQ51gLE	Shelbizleee (344K Followers)	SHEIN's repulsive greenwashing using influencers to promote fast fashion & lies	56.572	272	30.06.2024 - 00:35

In the coding process of YouTube comments, the framing processes outlined by Benford and Snow (2000) can be effectively applied to the discourse around greenwashing in social movements. Diagnostic framing in the context of greenwashing identifies the misleading environmental claims made by companies and attributes responsibility to these corporations for deceiving consumers and neglecting genuine environmental commitments. Prognostic framing suggests actionable solutions, such as implementing stricter regulations on advertising, encouraging companies to adopt transparent

reporting practices, and promoting consumer advocacy aimed at holding companies accountable. Motivational framing mobilizes collective action by urging consumers, environmental activists, and policymakers to challenge greenwashing practices through awareness campaigns, boycotts, and policy reforms, highlighting the critical necessity to maintain environmental integrity. These framing processes help consolidate public understanding, build consensus on the need for honest corporate practices, and stimulate action against greenwashing. Additionally, consumer responses toward greenwashing are classified as negative brand attitude, negative purchase intention (Wang et al. 2020), green distrust, green perceived risk, green consumer confusion, switching intention (Aji and Sutikno, 2015). Affective responses were also analyzed in content analysis and coded under the following headings (De Kwaadsteniet et al., 2013): angry, frustrated, irritated, indignant, agitated, and hostile.

Study 2. Focus Group Study

For the focus group study, participants were selected using a judgmental sampling technique, aiming to enhance diversity in terms of country of origin. A total of 14 participants were chosen. The discussions were conducted in English using open-ended questions and spanned approximately 90 minutes. With verbal consent from the participants, and assurances that all responses would remain confidential and anonymous, the focus group sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Participants were queried about their understanding and perception of greenwashing, the impact of greenwashing on their purchasing behavior, their emotional reactions to it, and how the ecological reputation of a product's country of origin influences their assessment of greenwashing practices.

As shown in Table 2, the focus group consisted of eight male and six female participants, with the majority being within the 18-35 age range. The largest segment of respondents hailed from Turkey (n=6), followed by Iran with four participants. The remaining members of the focus group, each representing one participant, were from the UK, Poland, Kazakhstan, and Iraq.

Table 2. Demographics of the Focus Group

Gender	N	Nationality	N
Male	8	UK	1
Female	6	Türkiye	6
Age	N	Iran	4
18-35	10	Poland	1
36-55	4	Kazakhstan	1
		Iraq	1

Findings

Findings of Study 1

First of all, consumer responses to the greenwashing practices of these firms are not predominantly shaped by the environmental image linked to their country of origin. A significant number of the commentators had unclear comments about COO ecological image, mostly they focused on their personal experiences with the products acquired from these firms. Consumers predominantly engage in discussions about the brand itself rather than its COO. Users do not explicitly associate Sweden with H&M. They generally characterize H&M as a Western brand, attributing its identity to the COO. The remarks are polarized, predominantly evaluating the COO of Western companies in relation to Chinese brands like SHEIN and TEMU. For example:

"It's always the West who creates this problems! in Romania I used to get clothes from my brothers if in good condition. In the west there are a lot of shallow people, with no education regarding the environment desperate to look cool and wasting a lot of money."

"Clothes, plastic bottles or our waste sent to another country is called recycling by governments. It doesn't matter where it goes... it seems. As long as it goes outside our western developed countries!!!"

The analyzed data suggests that diagnostic framing is the most prevalent (231 comments), indicating a strong focus on identifying problems, challenges, or issues related to greenwashing in fast-fashion industry. Prognostic framing is used less frequently (78 comments), showing some attention to solutions or strategies for addressing the diagnosed issues. However, there is a relatively low level of emphasis on encouraging action or mobilizing individuals against green washing, namely motivational framing is minimal (36 comments). This situation shows that consumers generally comment on the current situation rather than taking action and remain hesitant to produce solutions. An example of a comment about diagnostic and prognostic framing can be seen below:

"...And I'm surprised about the fashion habits of some of my friends, who send me pics of what they just bought like every second week... So it is really important to spread awareness to this problem of overconsumption. Thank you for your work!" *(Diagnostic framing example)*

I'm really trying not to buy too much clothes and try to buy second hand clothing. It's hard but it need to be done for the environment and also my pocket." *(Prognostic framing example)*

Table 2. Category for Collective Action Frames

Collective Action Frames	Title of the video			
	H&M and Zara: Can fast fashion be eco-friendly?		SHEIN's repulsive greenwashing using influencers to promote fast fashion & lies	
	Number of comments	%	Number of comments	%
Diagnostic framing	83	25.7	43	24.3
Prognostic framing	30	9.3	6	3.4
Motivational framing	2	0.6	0	0
Diagnostic framing & Prognostic framing	14	4.4	6	3.4
Prognostic framing & Motivational framing	29	9	2	1.1
Diagnostic framing, Prognostic framing & Motivational framing	5	1.5	2	1.1
Diagnostic framing & Motivational framing	0	0	1	0.6
N/A	160	49.5	117	66.10
Total	323	100.00	177	100.00

Analysis of the comments on both videos shows that a significant proportion do not express negative emotional reactions. However, there are also comments with negative sentiments that cannot be ignored. The dominant emotions are frustration (H&M Video: 23 comments - Shein Video: 17 comments) and agitation (H&M Video: 21 comments - Shein Video: 7 comments), suggesting that many viewers feel discontent and disturbed by the video. Irritation (H&M Video: 17 comments - Shein Video: 4 comments) also appears frequently, indicating annoyance. While fewer comments express stronger emotions like anger (H&M Video: 6 comments - Shein Video: 0 comments), indignation (H&M Video: 4 comments - Shein Video: 2 comments), or hostility (H&M Video: 3 comments - Shein Video: 11 comments).

"Feel more guilty for the people who get no clothes, and only get clothes through what we throw out.. its only the brands fault, also this brands aren't sustainable they just want your money and to market to you a wealthy snob whose willing to pay 80 dollars for a white t-shirt."

"UK here, and we like our high-street charity shops. I've started seeing Shein stuff in the charity shops I frequent and it makes me very sad. And is if the problem wasn't bad enough, now Temu has popped up. Another waste factory profiting off of slavery and aggressively advertising all over the internet, bragging about their cheap prices... we never learn, do we?."

The data reveals various negative consumer reactions toward the brand. Negative purchase intention is the most prominent for both brands and indicating a significant reluctance among consumers to engage in future purchases. Consumer feedback indicates that greenwashing adversely affects brand perception, resulting in diminished purchasing behavior towards these companies. Consumers predominantly evaluate the pricing and quality of products acquired from these brands. Green consumer confusion is important consumer response mentioned in the comments, suggesting that many consumers are uncertain or unclear about the brand's green claims or sustainability efforts. Negative brand attitude, green distrust, green perceived risk are relatively less observed consumer responses. Finally, switching intention is noted in some comments, indicating some consumers are considering switching to other brands. Furthermore, they also explore the possibilities of producing their own apparel and acquiring pieces from thrift shops as alternatives to purchasing from these firms.

"The most eco friendly product is the one you already have. Keep it for as long as possible, repair it, resell it from person to person, stop buying new products, go thrifting, rent one-time-use clothes like suits and wedding dresses."

Findings of Study 2

First, focus group participants were asked whether they had heard of greenwashing terminology and if so, what greenwashing means. 9 out of 14 participants stated that they had heard the word "Greenwashing" before and knew the meaning of the word, while the remaining participants stated that they had not heard this concept before. While most participants defined the concept as a mismatch between words and deeds, some participants defined it as a firm's behavior that is negatively adverse to what they promised beforehand.

"Not exactly sure, but if I remember correct, it was something about companies trying to show them as environmentally friendly as possible, but while not being so." (Male, Turkey)

"Perhaps it is mentioned when companies try to pass themselves as environmentally friendly, but beneath the surface they perhaps actually harm the environment. Through marketing or various means, they can generate publicity that makes them perceived as environmentally friendly" (Male, Turkey)

The concept of greenwashing was explained to all participants in order to eliminate the lack of information about the concept and to prevent misidentifications. It was then realized that the concept was actually known by all participants, but some of the participants were not familiar with the terminology. As the second question in the focus group is addressed, a deeper exploration into consumer experiences with greenwashing is aimed for. Participants were asked whether they were aware of any greenwashing instances and to share their experiences. While some comments focused on well-known cases, others emphasized why and how companies engage in greenwashing.

"I think a lot of companies nowadays use greenwashing. A big example is brands like H&M and Zara." (Female, UK)

"For example, one of the companies that I can name is Nestle. I think they are one of the companies that are harming the nature more than any other company. Even though they are producing maybe coffee, even water." (Female, Iran)

"The fact that they also have the power to affect our decisions makes it harder. For example, Starbucks. They use paper but at the end of the day, they also harm us. Harmful for our health because they color the paper and it's also chemical." (Male, Turkey)

"They just wrap popcorn in a plastic bag. After that, they put this plastic bag in a paper bag. And to say we are eco-friendly recycling, you can recycle this paper bags, but inside they have a plastic bag again." (Female, Turkey)

"Actually, I watched a documentary about this. There was a tuna company that fished there. And they have ocean friendly belt. But the charity was funded by that company also. That was also the sub-charity of that company." (Male, Turkey)

In particular, participants stated that it is not economical for companies to fully and accurately implement sustainability, and that companies engage in greenwashing practices to protect their own interests. As two participants stated:

"They try to deceive people for their own benefits...That's why we are not that much, I mean, trustful for businesses. Maybe they are right, but as we have deceived a lot of times, we don't trust them." (Female, Kazakhistan)

"I think it's not economically friendly to follow whatever it's written on sustainable development goals. That's why most of the companies or factories are trying to show that in the advertisement they are having. That they are following the lead, but unfortunately it is not what they want to do." (Female, Iran)

When asked how do you feel when you recognized companies making greenwashing, participants were a little more reserved than in the previous study, where Youtube users were more open about their feelings. Indignance and anger were the most commonly expressed emotions. Some participants expressed these emotions as follows:

"They probably assume that we are stupid." (Male, Turkey)

"Because they generally do it without lying, but by misinterpretation of the data. Feel manipulated" (Male, Iran)

I feel infuriated that they assume me as stupid. (Mae, Turkey)

One participant said that she approached the issue from another dimension. She said that she could no longer feel anything because she had been manipulated by so many parties in so many different ways. Emotionally feeling indifferent against greenwashing was an interesting finding of this study.

"And as consumers, we have very little resources to take action against it. Okay, we're going to make a discussion about those actions. But as for feelings, I don't feel anything. … We are manipulated all the time. It's like a kind of our daily life. Manipulated by influencers, manipulated by customers, from projects, from companies. We're manipulated from everything. And it doesn't make any sense anymore" (Female, Turkey)

In exploring whether consumers feel empowered to influence corporate behavior, we seek to understand the extent to which individuals believe their purchasing choices and actions can impact how businesses operate. This question is central to discussions about consumer pressure on companies and the potential for collective action to drive change in business practices. In general, the responses were more in diagnostic framing which refers to the identification and attribution of problems, rather than prognostic or motivational framing.

"I mean, we end up resigning to what the companies are trying to do. What they do is very obvious, but since they didn't get away with it, they continue doing the same." (Female, Turkey)

One participant responded in a more prognostic framework by suggesting a solution. The participant expresses that the ability to boycott an unsustainable company is a privileged decision, particularly in underdeveloped countries where purchasing sustainable or ethical products may be too expensive. The participant suggested that the cost of opting for more ethical options can be a significant barrier for many people, so alternatives such as buying second-hand should be considered. One participant, however, stated that greenwashing should influence purchasing decisions but acknowledged that the problem is too large to be solved by an individual's actions alone. She also noted that very few people are concerned about this issue and, as a result, they prefer to do whatever they want without thinking about whether a company or brand is environmentally friendly.

In this focus group discussion, participants explored how COO and its ecological image impact perceptions of greenwashing, particularly in the cases of H&M and Shein. They noted that H&M, associated with stricter regulations in Europe, is seen as more sustainable, while Shein, produced in China, is criticized for exploiting weaker regulations and promoting overconsumption through cheap, low-quality products. The discussion highlighted how COO influences consumer trust and ethical considerations, emphasizing the role of regulatory environments in shaping corporate sustainability.

"And because of the cheap prices, they promote overconsumption. And I think our main issue with H&M and Shine and other fashion companies is the overconsumption due to microtrends." (Female, UK)

"Different countries have different regulations. Companies with stricter governmental rules will be more sustainable, whereas companies like Shein, produced in China, have fewer regulations, allowing for less ethical practices." (Male, Turkey)

Conclusion

The current study illuminates several key dynamics in consumer perceptions of greenwashing, contrasting and complementing existing literature while answering the research questions posed. It reveals that consumer conceptualization of greenwashing centers around perceived discrepancies between company claims and actual practices, a notion consistent with accounts from focus group participants and prior research (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This study further delineates specific ways consumers perceive greenwashing, showcasing an erosion of trust and an inducement of skepticism, especially when consumers engage more deeply with brand narratives.

Regarding consumer perception and response, the research finds that greenwashing significantly impacts purchasing behaviors. Consumers often resort to alternative strategies, such as buying from thrift stores or competitors, reflecting a disillusionment with greenwashing tactics. This aligns with Lyon and Maxwell's (2011) findings, which show that consumer actions can pressure firms to change unsustainable practices.

Additionally, both analyzing Youtube comments and conducting a focus group study, namely using the two data collection techniques complementary to each other, contributed to deeper insights. For example, there were limited responses to the question asked in the focus group to learn about the emotions associated with greenwashing, but negative emotional responses were expressed more frequently and intensely in Youtube comments. Affective responses are also complex and varied. While many consumers feel irritation and agitation, understanding of the broader greenwashing phenomenon generates emotional fatigue among others. This implies that frequent exposure to greenwashing might desensitize some, underscoring the need for companies to engage in authentic interactions rather than superficial sustainability rhetoric.

The study confirms that the ecological image of the COO impacts consumer evaluations but is not a sole determinant. While there is an association between perceived COO ecological image and brand practices, consumers often judge brands like H&M and Shein on direct experience rather than COO alone. This finding necessitates a reframing of environmental branding strategies, taking into account regional consumer perceptions and the importance of aligning COO ecological image with genuine corporate practices.

The research contributes theoretically by expanding the understanding of greenwashing perception beyond the simple dichotomy of true versus false environmental claims. It underscores complex consumer attitudes shaped by a blend of cognitive evaluations and emotional responses. For instance, while some consumers express irritation, others experience emotional indifference, a finding that challenges the traditional narrative of uniform consumer backlash against greenwashing (Laufer, 2003). This suggests a nuanced spectrum of consumer responses, advocating for theoretical models to account for diverse emotional and cognitive factors.

Practically, the study highlights the critical need for brands to prioritize transparency and authenticity in environmental messaging to mitigate skepticism. Particularly for brands like H&M and Shein, which operate globally and under varying regulatory contexts, understanding local consumer perceptions can guide strategic decisions regarding communication and sustainability practices. Enhancing beyond surface-level commitments to demonstrate real environmental action could restore brand credibility and potentially stimulate consumer trust and loyalty.

This study faces several limitations. The use of YouTube comments may introduce self-selection bias, capturing only opinions from those motivated to comment, potentially skewing the results. Additionally, the limited focus group size restricts the generalizability of the findings, and relying solely on YouTube limits insights from other social media platforms and offline contexts. Future studies could delve into analysis of comments on other platforms and longitudinal analyses to observe changes in consumer perceptions over platforms and over time, particularly in response to evolving environmental market trends. In-depth examinations of geographical and cultural variations in consumer responses to greenwashing might reveal important insights into regional differences and provide more comprehensive guidance for global brands.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The authors confirm being the sole contributor of this work and have approved it for publication.

Peer-review

Externally peer-reviewed.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
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