



GREENWASHING

IT'S JUST NOT CLEAN MELINDA LIU



The “green” in Greenwashing isn’t talking about nature, it’s talking about money.

IMAGINE THIS:

You’re scrolling through your social media, and come across a new, sustainable, “Go Green” series launched by your favourite clothing brand. After browsing through the latest styles on offer, you click **purchase**, happy to add another piece to your ever-growing wardrobe.

Helping the environment whilst also getting new clothes - how good!

BUT LITTLE DO YOU KNOW...

GREENWASHING: WHAT IS IT?

Greenwashing refers to a form of marketing where companies **falsely lead** consumers to believe their products, actions, or policies are environmentally friendly, when in reality, it is usually the exact opposite.

Greenwashing companies borrow the pretense of purposeful, **social marketing** to play into the emotive mindsets of eco-conscious consumers, with the common denominator of sucking up promotional space and worsening environmental problems rather than bettering them.

This form of **illusionary marketing** lies across all industries, from clothing, plastics, cars to even food production. In our increasingly **hyper-consumerist** and **purpose-driven society**, the process of greenwashing is only further overlooked and mistaken for good.

Fuelling the fire, larger greenwashing companies play up **Google search term** words related to sustainability, such as “**eco**” and “**organic**”, further building their imaginary “**green**” brand and making it harder for consumers to locate the real, smaller ethical companies.

Given that there is no regulated use of these green-synonymic terms, we can’t guarantee that companies aren’t just sticking them into ads or packages to create a perceivable **green halo** that may have very little to do with their actual sustainability practices.

Think about it, when you see a nature-themed label, or the word “SUSTAINABILITY” branded across a company’s website, doesn’t that make you feel eco-friendly? Like you’d be doing better for the environment if you indulge yourself and buy something?

Think again...and think harder.



Figure 1: A model wearing one of H&M’s latest Spring 2021 sustainability-driven collection, but is it really as it says? How do we know? (image source: H&M website)

GREENWASHING IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY: ALL STYLE, NO SUBSTANCE

As if that's not bad enough, the fashion industry already consumes more energy than the aviation and shipping industry combined, **contributing to 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions**. And greenwashing certainly isn't improving the numbers.

The 2021 Synthetics Anonymous report by the Changing Markets Foundation picked up that across the spheres of fast fashion, luxury fashion and online retailing, about 39% of products came with sustainability-related claims. Upon further assessment, it was found that **59% of those claims did not stand up to the latest guidelines on avoiding greenwashing**.

Among the many groundless claims lies **H&M's Conscious Collection**, which was

found to contain more synthetic materials than its main collection, as well as having **mislabelled** its garments with **inaccurate representations** of recycled material percentage. Other renowned brands found to be greenwashing include **ASOS** and **M&S** with **89%** and **88%** of claims failing to measure up respectively.

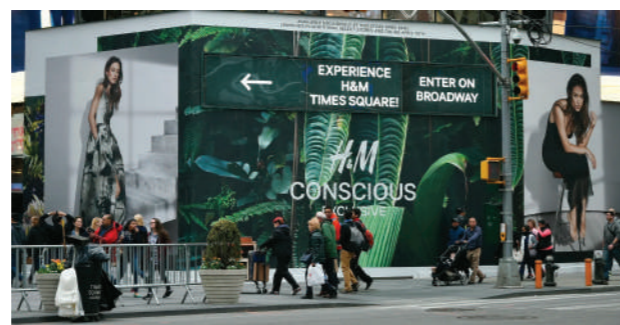


Figure 2: A H&M Conscious Collection Pop-Up Shop in 2015 (image source: Andrew H. Walker/H&M Getty Images).

THE CAR INDUSTRY & EMISSIONS CHEATING SOFTWARE

Beyond the fashion industry, multiple car companies including Volkswagen, Audi and Mercedes have been involved in controversial lawsuits from late 2015 to 2018 for using **emissions cheating software (otherwise dubbed "defeat devices")**. These devices were able to sense and alter real diesel

emission values to evade detection tests, ultimately allowing cars to emit up to **40 times** the legally permitted limit for nitrogen oxide pollutants. It is through using these "defeat devices" that the car companies were able to **deceptively advertise**



and **greenwash** their vehicles as **clean and environmentally friendly**. Unfortunately for those companies however, the troubling truth caught up to them in court, costing over billions of USD to cover for their cheating claims.

Though many car company emission scandals have been unveiled in the past, there is also no guarantee that these companies won't continue to find ways to cheat the system.

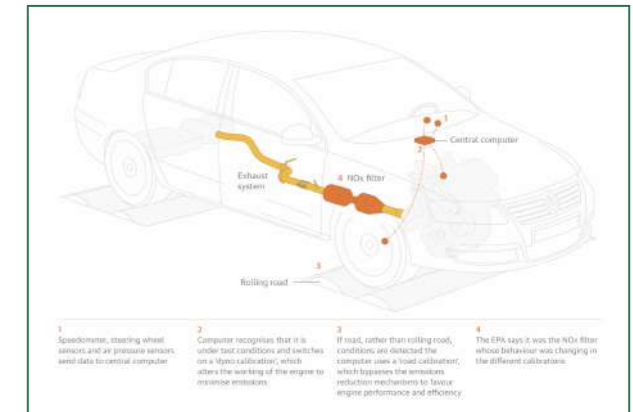


Figure 3: Diagram depicting how the Volkswagen defeat devices functioned within a car (image source: The Guardian 2015).

FIJI WATER: WASHING ITSELF CLEAN

One particularly renowned case of Greenwashing is the **Fiji Water ad campaign**, which utilised Green Marketing to construct a **sustainable brand image**, but in actuality was still taking part in environmentally detrimental actions. Back in 2015, the water company used a young girl's emotive narration to paint its product to be "a gift from nature to us" and applied a **peaceful, clean aesthetic** to smother away its large environmental footprint.



In reality, plastic bottles take an average of 450 years to break down in the environment, but with some well-calculated **brand marketing strategies**, Fiji Water was successfully able to divert consumer attention towards purchasing more of its non-sustainable products with absolutely no changes to the brand's real environmental impact. Fiji Water is one example of many companies that **spend more time, money and effort into looking sustainable rather than being sustainable**.

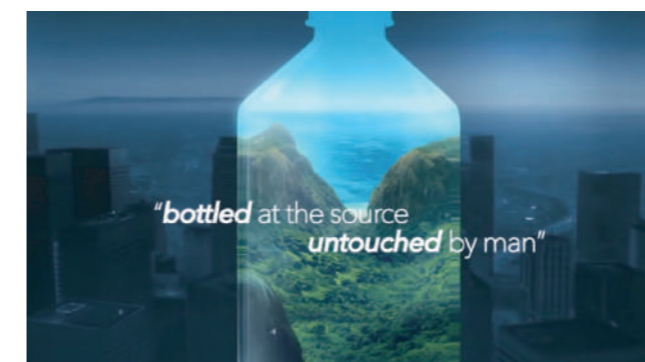


Figure 4: A snapshot of Fiji Water's 2015 ad campaign, portraying the water bottle as a gift from the environment (image source: Our Changing Climate Youtube).

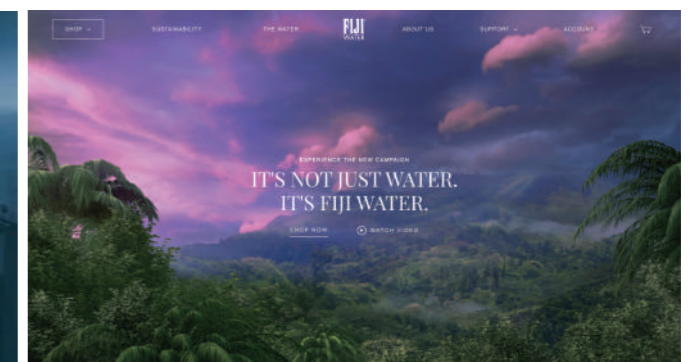


Figure 5: Fiji Water's current website home page (2021)

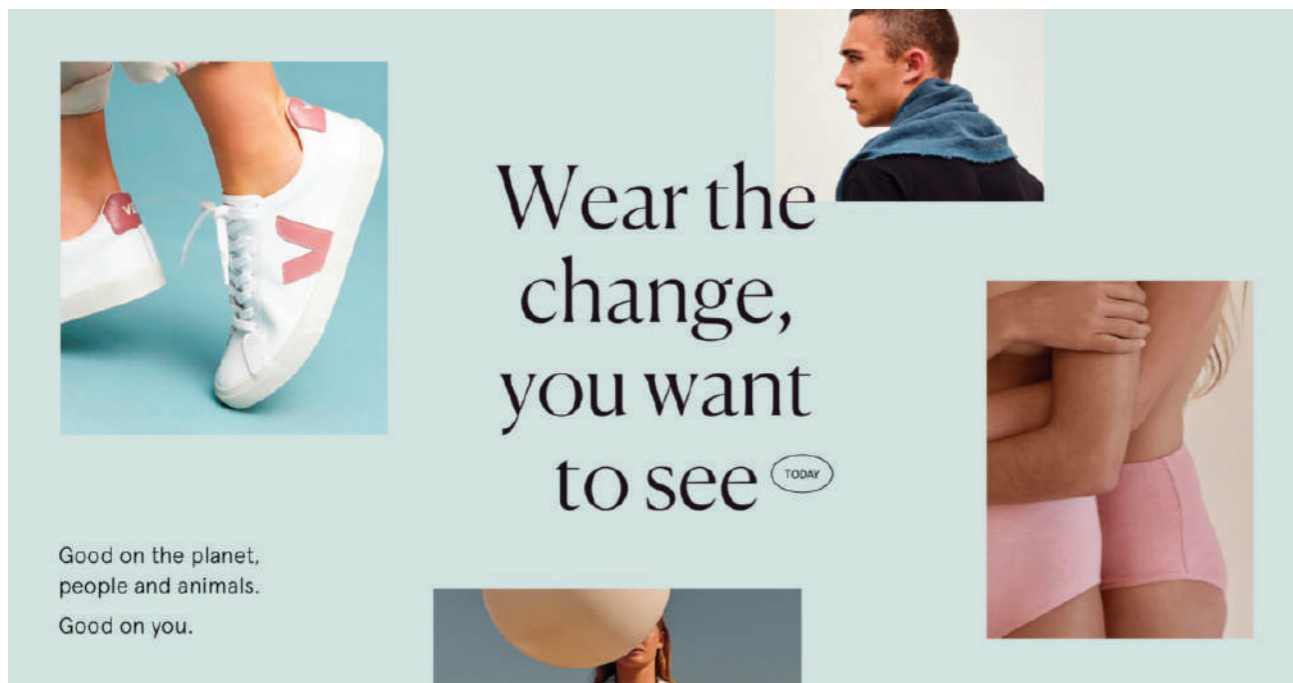
BUY LESS, BUY BETTER & RESEARCH MORE

In truth, there is no better way to be more sustainable than to **not purchase anything at all**. But given we do choose to purchase, what we can do as consumers is to be more **vigilant** and **informed** in the ways we make our purchase decisions - what are its **materials and sources**? Is the company making a **conscious decision to reduce its carbon footprint and wastage**? Are they being **transparent** and **exact** with their good intentions?

And, most importantly, **do we really need to buy this?**

Companies that are truly ethical do not thrive upon **bait-filled marketing language** and possess **legitimate certifications** for their green approach. Such companies will also be transparent with how they go about their business, spending appropriately on packaging in order to **deliver an environmentally responsible experience** with their products. Examples of such within the fashion industry include **CHNGE, Patagonia** and **AFENDS**.

CHNGE  Afends.



Wear the change, you want to see TODAY

Good on the planet, people and animals.
Good on you.

 good on you[®]

Figure 6: A Sustainable Fashion Campaign driven by Good On You, a website dedicated to delivering sustainability ratings on various fashion brands - a good resource to use for research! (image sources: Good on You website)

THE GREEN TAKEAWAY

Society grows more purpose-driven by the day, with around **75% of Generation Z consumers more likely to buy into brands with purposeful direction**. This purpose-driven mindset is exactly what Greenwashing exploits to gain their cold, hard profits.

Whilst some Greenwashing is unintentionally committed by unknowing companies that lack the knowledge, most companies are **investing more time and money on marketing themselves as "green" rather than actually being "green"**.

And we, as consumers, possess one of the greatest powers to stop this money-hungry force jeopardising the future of sustainable consumption - by **buying less, buying better and researching more**.



Figure 7: A protest against Greenwashing during the COVID19 pandemic (image source: Michael Fornton/Flickr)



Figure 8: A collapse of an 8-storey textile factory in Bangladesh, 2013, raises the need for more transparency in the textile industry (image source: Sydney Environment Institute).

NOW, IMAGINE THIS:

You're scrolling through your social media, and come across a new, sustainable, **"Go Green"** series launched by your favourite clothing brand. After browsing through the latest styles on offer, you huff and close the tab. No **legitimate awards** nor **transparency** to back up the claims of being truly sustainable, they'd need to do a little more than using an **"eco-friendly" aesthetic** to reel you in.

Maybe it's more worthwhile giving the secondhand thrift shop a go instead.



Thanks for reading!
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