

Zoe Culver

7 February 2020

H&M Conscious and the Impact of Greenwashing

Over the course of the last few years, many studies have been published stating how if we do not act soon, the effects of climate change will become irreversible. What we buy, how we travel, what we eat and so much more has an impact on our environment. Each person must make decisions every single day that affect their carbon footprint and their overall impact on the state of our world. Since what we buy has such an influence on our surroundings, consumers are conscious of their purchases and more than ever, and buying “green” is playing a huge part in decision making within the marketplace. In an effort to stay current and make their brands look more appealing to those concerned about the climate crisis, fast fashion companies such as H&M and Zara have created new clothing lines to falsely brand themselves as “eco-friendly” in a process known as “greenwashing”.

As stated by Sharlene Gandhi, greenwashing is a “method of using the climate crisis as a means of marketing without any fundamental change to business,” (Gandhi 1). One of the notorious culprits of practicing greenwashing is fast fashion companies. According to Luz Claudio, “Fast fashion provides the marketplace with affordable apparel aimed mostly at young women,” (Claudio 1). As people try to keep up with current trends, fast fashion gives consumers the ability to follow along and buy knock-off or fashionable items without spending as much as they would buying the real product. With fast fashion holding a big spot in the industry and locations almost everywhere, it makes buying garments too easy since it is both inexpensive and accessible. The EPA Office of Solid Waste found that “Americans throw away more than 68

pounds of clothing and textiles per person per year,” (1). Overall, it’s not a surprise that fast fashion does not give people the incentive to continue wearing last year’s biggest items. Since people now have an expectation for inexpensive, relevant fashion they continue to waste and damage our planet by throwing away their clothing made through non-environmentally friendly means.

Because of their wasteful nature in their production process, fast fashion companies have not made the best name for themselves in terms of being environmentally conscious. In attempts to make themselves look better and try to cut down on their waste, some companies have decided to start eco-friendly lines of clothing within their company. One example of a fast-fashion company attempting to clear their name in the public eye is H&M with their “Conscious” line. On their website, H&M promises a variety of “organic” and “sustainable fashion pieces” for their customers (H&M US). In this campaign, H&M is marketing toward its audience of both loyal customers and those who are just looking for a more sustainable way to dress. Fast fashion companies may be stylish, but they are known for their immoral behavior and their negative impact on the environment. By creating this line of clothing, H&M is attempting to make a better name for themselves and make buyers feel less guilty about their choice to shop with them.

H&M is able to capture its audience through the use of pathos and ethos. Being a well-known, large company, they are largely trusted by their audience. The fast fashion industry is commonly known for not being green because of their careless use of water and their reckless ways of discarding factory waste. The fact that they are advertising and preaching that they have altered their production, however, makes it seem as though they used their vast resources to change their ways. H&M also uses emotional methods to persuade their audience. Since the

climate crisis is on the top of many people's minds at the moment, by marketing themselves as a "green" company they are tapping into the feelings of their customers. In commercials made by H&M for the line, there are models laying in grass, running through fields, and enjoying the nature around them. The images of nature, models in fashionable clothing, and words of encouragement to stand up to climate change only add to the persuasion and evoke emotion in consumers' minds. Making consumers feel like they are making good decisions by buying the products could evoke strong emotion within them since, considering the current situation, many are trying to change their habits however they can and they feel as though it is their obligation to change.

As great as an environmentally conscious line of clothing sounds, H&M has used this title to trick their customers into believing they are supporting an eco-friendly movement. While something is better than nothing, no doubt, the ratio of green to regular garments offered in addition to their descriptions of the clothing is misleading. For example, their conscious line of clothing is about 470 items. This may seem like a decent amount, but is only a fraction of their total number of garments available. H&M has over 7200 garments available for sale, which means their Conscious line makes up a mere 6.5% of their total items offered. As Gandhi points out, "these ratios themselves reveal the fallibility of fast fashion's attempts at becoming sustainable, or the very lack of a credible attempt altogether," (Gandhi 1).

H&M also claims they are using organic or recycled materials like water bottles, organic cotton, food waste, and more, but these claims can be very deceiving. For example, one of the materials they claim to use is Pinatex. Pinatex is "a leather-like material made from sturdy food wastage like orange peelings and pineapple leaves" (1). While this sounds good in theory,

“Pinatex also contains plastic and petroleum-based agents, which not only offset any potential positive eco-friendly impact of using fruit fibers but also renders the material non-biodegradable,” (1). Pinatex is just one example of the misleading nature of the H&M campaign and greenwashing as a whole.

Companies tend to greenwash in order to make themselves look more appealing to customers. In H&M’s case, they use slight alterations to their production process and misleading advertising to make themselves look like they have made more changes than they really have. This method of marketing has become very popular across industries in the past couple of years, and it can be very difficult as a consumer to know what is truthful in these campaigns and what is not.

As not only a consumer interested in fashion but a human attempting to watch my carbon footprint, I have fallen into the traps of greenwashing. I have bought clothes from the *H&M Conscious* line before and was misled by their claims before knowing the extent of their greenwashing. When I heard about the deceptive campaigns these companies were using, I could not help but feel cheated. I had bought their products, thinking I was making impactful decisions, but in the end, it’s debatable whether a difference was really made. As consumers, we must be critical when thinking about the so-called “eco-friendly” campaigns around us. If we remain conscious and hold these companies to higher standards, maybe one day they will truly change their ways instead of lying for the sake of marketing.

Works Cited

- Claudio, Luz. "Waste couture: environmental impact of the clothing industry." *Environmental health perspectives* vol. 115,9 (2007): A448-54. doi:10.1289/ehp.115-a449
- Gandhi, Sharlene. *How Fast Fashion is Greenwashing*. Newstex, Cambridge, 2019. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/docview/2324883537?accountid=10559>.
- "Sustainable Fashion: Women's Organic & Sustainable Clothing: H&M US." *H&M*, www2.hm.com/en_us/women/concepts/conscious-sustainable-style.html.