

All You Need To Know About Greenwashing

March 15, 2022



When it comes to conscious consumerism, separating fact from fiction is imperative to making choices that truly respect people and planet. As more people take up the environment as a cause, however, a shift has been observed among companies that have track records of prioritising their bottom lines without concern for the human or ecological infrastructure that support them.

Originally adopting a position of comfortable inaction, these dubiously-intentioned businesses are now fervently trying to get skin in the ecological game in an attempt to capitalise on the growing demand for sustainable and ethical products. “Natural,” “Sustainable,” and “Plant Based” ranges have materialised at a breakneck pace. “Carbon Neutral” is the new buzzword darling of marketers.

This phenomenon is called greenwashing, and you are not imagining it. In this post, we will break down what it is, why it is a problem, and how you can avoid it on your sustainability journey.

WHAT IS GREENWASHING?



Greenwashing is when a company provides misleading information about the sustainability or ethics of their products or services, suggesting they are more environmentally-friendly or ethical than in reality.

In contrast to companies that are taking concrete action to lessen their environmental impact across the board—or better still are built from the ground up with environmental and ethical principles at heart—companies that engage in greenwashing are actively distracting consumers with promises of environmental stewardship while continuing business as usual behind the scenes.

It is deceitful and detrimental, and consumers deserve better.

GREENWASHING IN THE WILD

Wondering what greenwashing looks like in real life? It happens in a few different ways – some less obvious than others.

A main offender is the vague use of buzzwords like “green” and “eco-friendly” on packaging and in product marketing with limited or no readily-available evidence to back up those claims. This is often coupled with over the top visual cues – think green (as in the colour) packaging and rampant depictions of nature.

*“The fabrics are less unsustainable,
but that doesn’t make them sustainable”*

“Some [product] ranges are named ‘eco’ or have ‘eco’ in the name,” writes Helena Horton [for The Guardian](#), “but it would be very difficult to prove whether the entire supply chain and manufacturing process was eco-friendly.”

This is the perfect segue into another form of greenwashing for which the fast fashion industry is notorious: concealed trade-offs. Through this tactic, brands will play up one product or aspect of a product that can be deemed “sustainable” while doing little to address other (often major) environmental or social concerns.



A prime example of this is the arrival of eco-friendly ranges from major fast fashion retailers, for example the “Join Life” collection from ZARA and the “Conscious” collection from H&M. These collections are problematic for a multitude of reasons, first and foremost that they do nothing to change our overall attitude toward overconsumption of low-quality items made in exploitative conditions destined for landfill.

Dig a little deeper, and you will see that the “solutions” these collections are offering up are simply half-baked.

“The fabrics are less *unsustainable*, but that doesn’t make them sustainable” [writes Jen Greggs](#), a self-described “reformed shopaholic and fast fashion addict” turned sustainability blogger. “Organic cotton eliminates pesticides, which is a big environmental win, but still requires a [huge amount of water and land](#). Recycled polyester avoids extracting virgin resources, but still causes microplastic pollution.”

The fact remains: you can put lipstick on a pig, but no amount of greenwashing can make an inherently unsustainable and unethical business model sustainable or ethical.

GOVERNMENT VERSUS GREENWASHING

The silver lining in all of this is that people have begun to catch on, and regulatory bodies are starting to take action to protect consumers.

In the United Kingdom, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) [is preparing a damning report](#) of companies in Britain's fashion sector that are making claims about the environmental soundness of their products without providing evidence to back these claims up. The authority, which regulates competition in the UK, is [reported to be investigating](#) additional sectors' environmental claims as well, including transport, beauty, and food and drink.

This action stems from The Green Claims Code. [Published](#) in 2021, the code features a [13-point checklist](#) to which businesses must adhere when making green claims, or else face legal action from bodies including the CMA, Trading Standards Services, sector regulators, and potentially even the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).

This handy explainer video provides an excellent overview:

CONCLUSION

“Greenwashing is a phenomenon that harms both the consumer and honest companies that hold the environment core to everything they do,” writes Phil Forbes in a blog post on [greenwashing in the packaging industry](#).

But once you know what to look out for, spotting—and avoiding—greenwashing becomes second nature.

As consumers, you have the power to shape the world we live in with every purchase you make – or don't. And wielding that power will only cost you the money you were already going to spend anyway.

Tags: **EDUCATION** **FAST FASHION** **GREENWASHING**