

**How
Conscious
is
H&M
Conscious?**



A LOT OF PEOPLE ASK FOR GUARANTEES: ‘CAN YOU GUARANTEE LABOUR CONDITIONS? CAN YOU GUARANTEE ZERO CHEMICALS?’ OF COURSE WE CANNOT WHEN WE’RE SUCH A HUGE COMPANY OPERATING IN VERY CHALLENGING CONDITIONS.

— Helena Helmersson, *H&M Head of Sustainability*

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SUMMARY

In the past 20 years, the amount of textile waste in the US has gone up 400 percent.

This outrageous spike can largely be accredited to the environmentally toxic trend that is fast fashion.

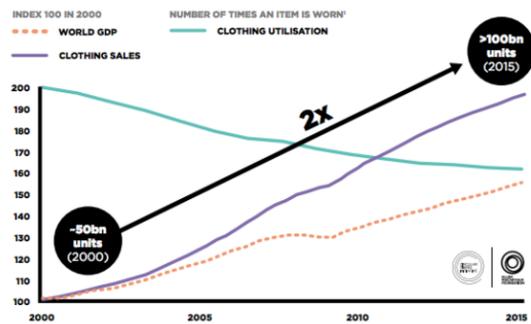


Fig 1. GROWTH OF CLOTHING SALES AND DECLINE IN CLOTHING UTILISATION SINCE 2000

Brands like H&M, Forever 21, and Zara have encouraged consumers to buy more disposable clothes by making them cheap and cycling through trends faster by using irresponsible practices and cutting corners in terms of environmental and labor costs.

The negative impacts of the industry are becoming more transparent and understood by digitally-enabled customers, and their demand for greener products is encouraging large retailers to respond with sustainable initiatives such as “H&M Conscious,” H&M’s effort to rebrand themselves as a sustainable company. Now, fast fashion brands who plaster their products, advertisements, and social media pages with green labels are being praised by publications and eco-conscious consumers alike for their efforts, but all the overzealous praise is incredibly misleading because brands like H&M are greenwashing to distance themselves from their role in damaging the environment.

There is no regulatory body which ensures that a company’s marketing is ethical, which leaves room for half-truths and unsubstantiated claims that create an attractive facade of sustainability.



Fig 2. GLOBAL MATERIAL FLOWS FOR CLOTHING USE IN 2015

As they compete for the attention of “green” consumers and for profit, companies are innovating and leapfrogging one another in that pursuit. But if “green” demand is to create genuinely “greener” products, the environmental claims of those products must be true and transparent. This is why greenwashing is such a significant impediment to continued progress.

To identify false “green” claims, Aurora Sharrard, the director of sustainability at the University of Pittsburgh, refers consumers to the TerraChoice environmental marketing agency’s Seven Sins of Greenwashing: hidden trade-off, no proof, vagueness, irrelevance, lesser of two evils, fibbing, and worshiping false labels.

This report will reveal just how sustainable H&M’s Conscious Collection really is by examining how the fast fashion conglomerate responds to each of the seven sins.



The Prevalence of Greenwashing Today

“Going green” is one of the fastest growing consumer trends within the retail industry as of now, and companies are rapidly beginning to match the demand with eco-friendly practices and products. Unfortunately, many companies have also noticed that it’s much cheaper to *claim* to have environmental standards than it is to actually live by them.

“Greenwashed” products use deceptive eco-friendly jargon without full transparency as a strategy to appease green consumers who are misled by phony green initiatives that promote false claims. “Companies greenwash to pretend they’re addressing an issue, while in reality, they’re just looking to silence environmental critics,”

says Perry Wheeler, a spokesperson for Greenpeace USA. Greenwashing is minimally regulated but falls under the Green Guides of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which monitors truth in advertising. Deciphering whether a brand is truly making strides to minimally impact the environment is mostly up to the consumer. Responsible shoppers have to research and look for red flags, including jargon that does not provide verifying claims.

Perry suggests being wary of vague catchall terms such as sustainable, socially responsible, eco-friendly, or recycled content without substantiated evidence.

COMPANIES GREENWASH TO PRETEND THEY’RE ADDRESSING AN ISSUE, WHILE IN REALITY, THEY’RE JUST LOOKING TO SILENCE ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICS.

GREENPEACE USA

Sins of Greenwashing Study

In a 2010 study, TerraChoice, a leading North American environmental marketing company, investigated the claims of 4,744 “green” products carried in stores across the U.S. and Canada and found that 95 per cent of consumer products claiming to be green are guilty of at least one of the “7 sins” of greenwashing. Highlights from the study included:

- There are 73 per cent more green products on market today than in 2009.
- BPA-free claims are up by 577 percent since the 2009 Sins of Greenwashing study, appearing more frequently among toys and baby products than any other category studied.
- Phthalate-free claims increased 2,550 per cent since 2009.
- Good eco-labeling helps prevent (but does not eliminate) greenwashing—of the products certified by a recognized third-party certification, more than 30 percent are sin-free.

95% OF CONSUMER PRODUCTS CLAIMING TO BE GREEN ARE GUILTY OF AT LEAST ONE OF THE “7 SINS” OF GREENWASHING.



THE 7 SINS:

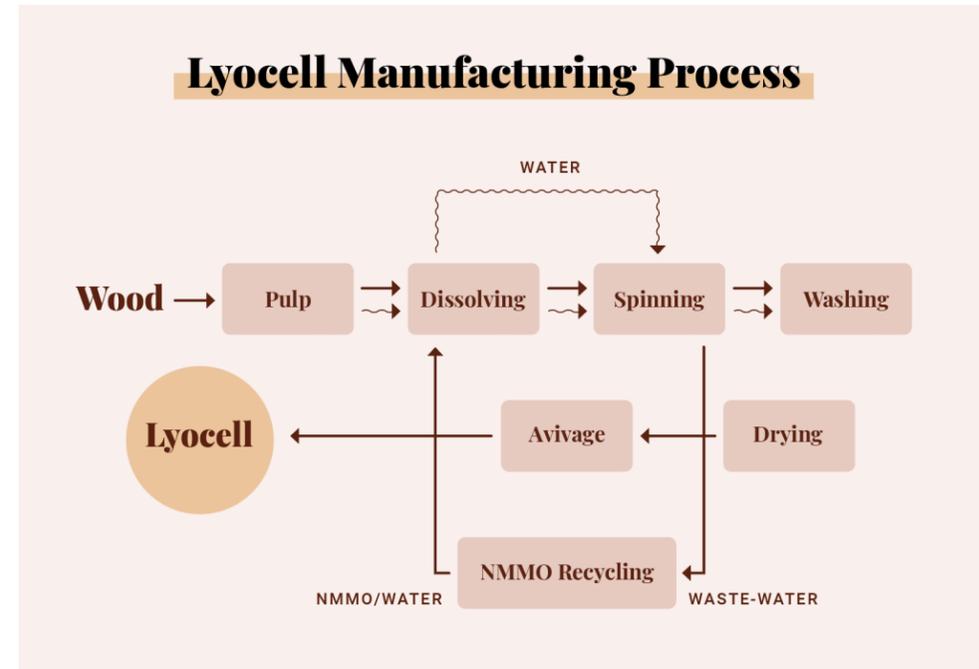
- 1 HIDDEN TRADE OFF
- 2 NO PROOF
- 3 VAGUENESS
- 4 IRRELEVANCE
- 5 LESSER OF 2 EVILS
- 6 FIBBING
- 7 WORSHIPPING FALSE LABELS

THE ISSUE WITH TENCEL®

H&M CONSCIOUS COLLECTION

Tencel is a branded name of Lyocell, a sustainable fibre regenerated from wood cellulose. It is obtained from eucalyptus trees that are grown on farms—no old growth forests, genetic manipulation, irrigation, nor pesticides are used. Lyocell is a revolutionary sustainable material, but in order to get the Tencel logo on a hangtag, a product only needs to contain 30% lyocell, meaning the other 70% could be constructed out of unsustainable materials that use destructive production methods potentially ruining the product's sustainable impact completely.

Here lies the 1st deadly sin, **Hidden Trade-Off**. Labeling a product as eco-friendly based on a small set of attributes while leaving out the other attributes that void the product's sustainable integrity.



This also makes H&M guilty of the 4th sin, **Irrelevance**: Stating something that is technically true but not a distinguishing factor. The lyocell does not count for anything if the product contains a larger percentage of environmentally unfriendly materials.

Additionally, Lenzig (the company that owns Tencel) recently started building the world's largest lyocell factory near Bangkok, Thailand. Professor Susanne Sweet, research manager for the Sweden-based Mistra Future Fashion program says, "One of the major impacts in production is the energy use and the climate impact."

So if you produce [lyocell] in countries where they use fossil fuels or coal or something, it is going to be really bad. It's understanding the system - it's not just the material," she cautions. Thailand's dramatic economic growth in the past decade has caused numerous environmental issues like air quality, deforestation, water scarcity, and waste issues, so placing an eco-friendly fabric plant there will be drawing from already limited resources.



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The “Conscious” Statement

*At H&M we’re committed to creating great fashion at the best price in a **sustainable** way. All our products are made with care and consideration for the people who make them and for the environment.*

*Garments containing more **sustainable** materials can be found across all our departments all year round – just look out for our green Conscious hangtags! So, what do we count as Conscious? To qualify for a green hangtag, a product must contain at least 50% **sustainable** materials, such as organic cotton and recycled polyester – but many of our garments contain more than that. The only exception is recycled cotton, which can only make up 20% of a product due to quality restraints. We are, however, working with innovations to increase this share as soon as possible.*

*To evaluate the materials, we use third-party data and external certifications. By choosing Conscious products, you help us make the fashion industry more **sustainable**!*

The Conscious Statement which H&M provides to describe what qualifies their Conscious Collection is only a short few paragraphs and is heavily peppered with the generic buzzword ‘sustainable’. In terms of explaining why these products are ‘conscious’ and ‘sustainable’, the only justification given is that they use up to 50% recycled material (or 20% for cotton products) in production. However, they don’t go into detail

about the types of items they’re recycling, how they’re recycled, how they’re produced, what the carbon footprint of these products is compared to their other ranges, or even what their definition of ‘sustainable’ is. It doesn’t feel very transparent and is thus guilty of the third sin of greenwashing, **Vagueness**: A claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.

SIN 03

SIN 07

TO EVALUATE THE MATERIALS, WE USE THIRD-PARTY DATA AND EXTERNAL CERTIFICATIONS.



The second to last line of the Conscious Statement is the epitome of the seventh sin of greenwashing, **Worshipping False Labels**: Implying that a product has a third-party endorsement or certification that doesn’t actually exist. As it stands, there are no laws regarding what a garment retailer needs to do in order to state that it is becoming sustainable, so H&M does not need to use government-sponsored environmental groups to verify the labels and claims they make about their products. Instead, they can hire their own third party organizations to review their products and give them the stamp of approval or simply make up half-truths regarding the sustainability of a product.

A CLIMATE POSITIVE FASHION INDUSTRY BY 2040

SIN 02

H&M has pledged to become 100% ‘climate positive’ by 2040, which is an impressive promise but there is a stark difference between promises and guarantees. There is no explicit timeline or evidence on how exactly they plan on attaining this, which brings us to the second sin, **No Proof**: Making an environmental claim without providing easily accessible evidence.

To put the insignificance of a pledge in perspective, H&M still has not delivered on its 2013 promise to pay 850,000 workers a living wage by 2018– something which they were highly praised for when they initially announced it.

Maintaining the Fast Fashion Model

The fast fashion business model is based on knocking off styles from high-end fashion shows and delivering them in a short time at cheap prices, typically using lower quality materials. According to the European Parliamentary Research Service, Zara offers 20 new clothing collections each year, and H&M is *still* putting out 16 compared to the standard of 6 in the fashion industry. This has led to consumers to see cheap clothing items increasingly as perishable goods that are 'nearly disposable', and that are thrown away after wearing them only seven or eight times.

At the root of it, fast fashion's business model is built on

getting us to buy more. The only way for these companies to make a real difference would be to not exist at all, or to entirely change their business models and slow down trend cycles. H&M is showing no signs of slowing down their current cycle rate, and are still contributing to destructive throwaway culture by doing so. This aligns with the fifth sin, **Lesser of Two Evils**: Claiming to be greener than other products in its category when the entire category is environmentally unfriendly

Fast fashion is unsustainable, and one "green" collection is trivial amongst 15 others.

<h2>ZARA</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launches 20 collections a year • Products go from design to retail in 5 weeks • Its fast supply chain is based on proximity • 60% of goods are produced in Europe 	<h2>H&M</h2> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launches up to 16 collections annually • Design to retail: a few weeks to 6 months • New products are delivered to stores daily • Trendy clothes in smaller quantities can be produced on shorter notice • Sources 80% of goods from Asia • European suppliers are used for fashion-sensitive items & items requiring rapid replenishment 
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Fast Fashion Streamlining Model, according to Datex 2018.



H&M IS PRODUCING

3,000,000,000

ARTICLES OF CLOTHING PER YEAR

according to the the New York Times (2019)

400,000

pieces being manufactured daily

\$4.3 bil

of unsold clothing in 2018

H&M started their Conscious initiative in 2013, so they are clearly not practicing what they preach and thus guilty of the sixth sin: **Fibbing**. Clever campaigns and overzealous praise might make us think brands like H&M are OK and even saving the environment that they destroyed in the first place. But as long as they are still selling clothes as cheaply and quickly as they are, no signs, awards or "green" initiatives are going to make a difference.

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