Unraveling the Truth of Sustainable Marketing in Fast Fashion Brands

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Fast fashion has grown due to the trend of wearing new clothes every day, causing environmental issues. Brands like H&M, Zara, and Mango claim to be sustainable, promoting recycling, reuse, and carbon footprint reduction this marketing strategies are considered as greenwashing. Greenwashing basically helps the brands to build a brand reputation as ecofriendly and sustainable brand. The very nature of fast fashion, releasing new collections every few months, challenges true sustainability. The focus on affordability means compromising material quality, leading to more waste. Despite extensive green marketing campaigns, there are doubts about the effectiveness of these efforts. This paper talks about what the consumers think about the claims of these brands and how the reality differs from the claim. This research would help us understand the different marketing strategies and make better consumer decisions.

Keywords: Sustainability, Marketing, Environment, Fast Fashion, Greenwashing

1. Introduction

The fashion industry is one of the most dynamic fields that evolve daily. To survive in this, one must emphasize both fashion and the quality of the product. In this competitive fashion world, these industries also need to make sure that their products are affordable so that they can have a big chunk of the customer base(Centobelli et al., 2022; Mandarić et al., 2022). To focus on making their apparel affordable, brands generally compromise on product quality. The desire to wear new outfits daily has fuelled fast fashion. This kind of business relies heavily on quick production and frequent collection updates to keep consumers up to date with the latest styles. To fulfil the demands in an affordable manner, these fashion brands use low-cost, low-quality garments, which have shorter lifespans, which add up to the waste burden on the environment(Abrishami et al., 2024). Most of these clothing is made up of synthetic material, which does not decompose quickly and leach out toxins and microplastics in soil and water, ultimately polluting them(Tyagi, 2024).

According to environmentalists, reports suggest that the fast fashion industry is responsible for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions, which is more than the aviation and shipping industries combined.

Fast fashion-induced environmental issues have raised the eyebrows of environmentalists, and even consumers have started thinking about the toll on the environment. This forced brands to introduce sustainability in their marketing strategies to face criticism. Brands like H&M, Zara, and Mango claim to be sustainable, promoting recycling, reuse, and carbon footprint reduction(Aggarwal & More, 2017; Wren, 2022). On the other hand, fast fashion itself has a nature that new clothing collections are meant to be realized now and then. Despite extensive green marketing campaigns, there are doubts about the effectiveness of these efforts. Our study examines whether these brands' sustainability claims hold up or are primarily used to boost sales and brand image(Schabasser, 2022).

It all comes to customers and how they respond to the brand's claims, marketing strategies, and the effectiveness of its sustainability efforts. Environmental awareness of consumers and transparency in clothing production and recycling operations, which play a key role so that the claims can stand true(Muchenje et al., 2023).

This paper revolves around the operations and the marketing strategies of the industry. The sustainability claims and the effect of fast fashion on the environment. And how the consumers respond to these marketing strategies. This paper will play a significant role in creating awareness and helping consumers to make better shopping calls.

2. Literature Review

Unquestionably, one of the industries that produces the most waste and discard is the fashion sector. Slow fashion prioritizes quality rather than quantity. Despite the progress that has been made to attain the sustainability goals in the past decade, still there are evidence of the adoption of the greenwashing strategies in the clothing sector. Expanding a brand using sustainable marketing strategies enhances brand trust. A study conducted by Carter et al. reveals that 53% of surveyed customers feel that brands should authentically care about social issues rather than merely participating in social responsibility for marketing gains(Carter et al., 2021). A practical metric has been developed to evaluate the mismanagement of sustainability by applying the newly established materiality guidelines for U.S. companies, which help pinpoint sustainability concerns that are relevant to particular industries. This study demonstrates that mismanagement of sustainability can be viewed as unethical business conduct when companies deliberately emphasize their performance on non-material issues over material ones, thereby distracting stakeholders from the firm's overall inadequate sustainability performance (Maniora, 2018). Thorisdottir and Johannsdottir highlight that the fashion industry has faced

criticism for its inadequate accountability in tackling sustainability challenges, including discussions on climate change and the excessive consumption of natural resources, which stem from its production and marketing practices (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2019). This concern is particularly pressing as the industry often depends on manufacturing in low-cost countries where environmental and safety regulations may be insufficient. For instance, the production of cotton is notably water-intensive, with over 19,000 litres required to create a single pair of jeans and a t-shirt(Radhakrishnan, 2017). These are the significant concerns given the water scarcity affecting certain areas globally. The shortage of clean water in numerous regions presents a critical challenge. Additionally, the fashion industry's unsustainable practices and continuous growth are negatively impacting the environment. This sector oversees the clothing life cycle, where relatively new garments are often discarded not due to wear and tear, but because of marketing strategies employed by the industry.

The advent of globalization and modern communication technologies has led to a quicker and more affordable fashion industry (Black & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, fashion industry has been propelled by the demands for rapidity, transformation, adaptability, and swift reaction (Christopher et al., 2004). The fashion industry today is characterized by significant resource consumption, rapid product turnover, and excessive consumption, leading to numerous adverse effects on society (Allwood et al., 2015). The textiles and clothing industry is deeply interconnected with various environmental, social, economic, and governmental challenges. (Gardetti & Ana Laura Torres, 2017).

The research aimed at identifying the marketing strategies of fast fashion retailers in connection with consumer perceptions of sustainability in the UK has revealed a specific consumer segment that is largely unresponsive to fast fashion items marketed with sustainability features: working-class women. This demographic represents a significant portion of the UK market. Additionally, the study indicated that consumers of fast fashion often overestimate their understanding of sustainability, suggesting a disparity between their perceived and actual knowledge of the subject (Peters et al., 2021). Fast fashion retailers often collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a strategic approach to address concerns from environmentally aware consumers. While these partnerships may initially appear advantageous, there is a significant risk that they could ultimately be detrimental to both parties involved. Fast fashion brands typically focus on profit maximization, whereas NGOs strive to meet the growing social and environmental expectations of the public. The collaboration between these two entities can enhance adaptability, flexibility, and innovation, while also helping to maintain their respective organizational identities. However, challenges may arise, particularly regarding potential opportunism and a lack of alignment in goals (J. Liu et al., 2014).

Pseudo-green companies are emerging in the market, seeking to obtain a competitive edge by engaging in greenwashing tactics, all while showing little genuine commitment to environmental protection (Jog & Singhal, 2019). Organizations that participate in greenwashing seek to persuade consumers that their operations or products are eco-friendly, despite having subpar environmental practices. Simultaneously, they promote an image of strong environmental responsibility. This conduct undermines the trust of consumers and investors in companies that genuinely prioritize environmental sustainability (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This results in confusion among consumers (Chen & Chang, 2013a) and adversely affects green purchasing behaviour, the perception of green brands, and customer loyalty, even among consumers who are environmentally aware(Hameed et al., 2021) and (Lee et al., 2020)Greenwashing is prevalent throughout the fashion and textile sector (Kaner, 2021).

Consumers often remain unaware of the hidden costs associated with inexpensive fashion. It is essential for policymakers, industry leaders, and other stakeholders to emphasize and communicate the drawbacks of fast fashion. This awareness can help steer consumers towards more sustainable fashion choices, considering the implications of fast fashion in terms of production, sourcing, design, marketing, and consumption (Brewer, 2019). The fast fashion industry has a significant global impact on carbon emissions. Since the beginning of this century, production in this sector has doubled, leading to a 30% rise in carbon emissions. While this might imply that the industry is making some strides toward sustainability, a true reduction in the environmental footprint of fashion could be realized by abolishing the fast fashion business model altogether (Peters et al., 2021)

Green marketing within the fashion industry pertains to the production of goods that prioritize ethical working conditions and environmental sustainability. This approach can be integrated into corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, aiming to balance business goals with ecological concerns. Sustainable practices in fashion are a shared responsibility, requiring both major companies and consumers to enhance their understanding and education regarding environmentally friendly choices. Successful green marketing should serve as a catalyst for transforming clothing consumption patterns, motivating consumers to opt for sustainable purchases that emphasize durability and are crafted from suitable materials through responsible production methods (S. Y. H. Liu et al., 2020)

According to SimilarWeb, its website holds the top position globally in terms of web traffic within the fashion and apparel sector. With prices set at $7 for tops, $12 for dresses, and $17 for jeans, Shein presents a more affordable and quicker alternative compared to Zara and H&M. To maintain low price points while adapting to rapidly changing fashion trends, these "real-time" brands utilize fossil fuel-based synthetic materials, which are less expensive, versatile, and more readily available than their natural counterparts. Consequently, polyester has emerged as the leading synthetic fibre, accounting for over half of the total global fibre production. This material is sourced from non-renewable resources, necessitates substantial energy for its extraction and processing, and generates considerable byproducts.

Legislation should be enacted to require fashion brands to disclose and adhere to their supply-chain commitments. Currently, New York is in the process of developing a law that would enforce supply-chain mapping, mandate reductions in carbon emissions consistent with a 1.5-degree Celsius target and require reporting on wages in relation to living wage standards. Brands generating over $100 million in revenue that fail to meet these criteria would face a penalty of 2% of their revenue.

After 25 years of experimenting with a voluntary, market-driven approach to fashion sustainability, a change is necessary. Encouraging consumers to align their intentions with actions by purchasing sustainable and often pricier fashion has proven

ineffective. If consumers were genuinely willing to pay more, the complexity of navigating claims and labels is overwhelming. Additionally, Kenneth P. Pucker (2022) found that it is unrealistic to expect that investors, driven by short-term goals and index-based performance metrics, will compel companies to adhere to environmental limits, a notion referred to as "greenwashing" by former investor Duncan Austin. Hence, (Jurowski & Jurowski, 2016)that the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles effectively tackles most of the challenges faced by the textile industry in a thorough manner. One of the measures proposed for implementation is the European Regulation on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) (J. Liu et al., 2014).

3. Hypothesis

1. There is no meaningful correlation between the level of recycling initiatives adopted by fast fashion brands and their reputation among consumers.
2. The implementation of green projects by fast fashion brands does not have a notable impact on their brand reputation among consumers.
3. The recycling practices of fast fashion brands do not appear to have a meaningful correlation with consumers' perceptions of the quality of their products.
4. The sustainable marketing assertions made by fast fashion brands do not substantially differ from the genuine environmental friendliness of their products.

4. Research Methodologies

The data acquisition was accomplished through a detailed survey with a questionnaire to assess the views and sentiments of consumers regarding the current situation of the fast fashion industry. The Google survey was created and distributed randomly to avoid biases in the collected opinions. The responses collected varied from bellow 18 to above 32 and their participation was voluntary. Total 172 participants were there in the sample size. The statistical data analysis was completed via IBM SPSS statistics26 software. The analysis of relationship between different dependent and independent variables were accomplished using Spearman correlation and Chi square test. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to check the reliability and validate the survey instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha score recorded was 0.881, which states that the data is significantly reliable (Fig 1)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.881	44

Figure 1 *Cronbach's Alpha score recoded is 0.881.*

Research Process Flowchart
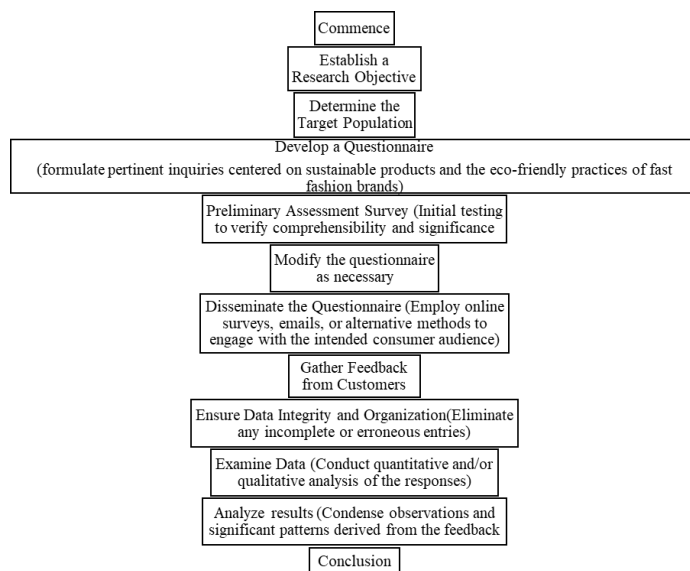
4.1 Structure of Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed so that the first part had 8 questions, including volunteers' personal details and shopping habits. Section 2 includes questions related to their views and how aware they are of topics like carbon footprint, sustainability, fast fashion, and shopping behaviour. The responses were recorded very on a scale of 1-5, which helped to record responses in various degrees. It helped us to understand the opinions and answer in an apprehendable way.

4.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation
Observations
In this paper we distributed the survey in the randomised fashion through google survey to eliminate data biasness. Total 172 responses were recorded out of which 85 were male and 86 were female. Majority of them were students. 90% of the responses recorded were from the volunteers aged between 18-27. Fast fashion is being popular in youth hence the data collected stands significant.
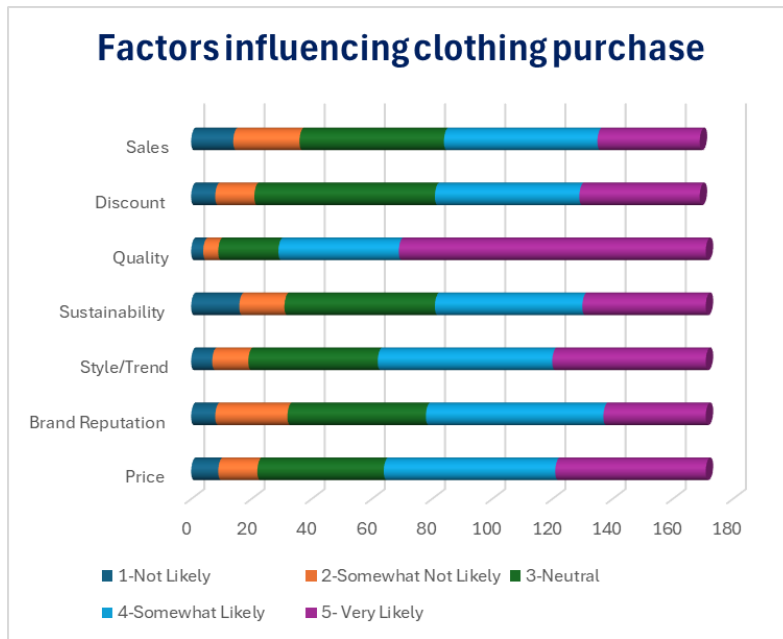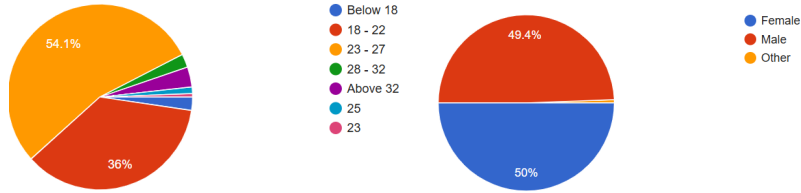

Quality and style/trend are likewise very important to customers, as evidenced by the large number of responses in the Very Likely and Somewhat Likely categories. Sustainability on the other hand have mixed responses, with significant segments in both the Very Likely and Neutral categories, indicating that while some customers place a high priority on sustainability, others do not. According to the graph, while buying clothes, people are typically affected by price, quality, sales, and discounts; sustainability is also somewhat significant, although not as much as other considerations.
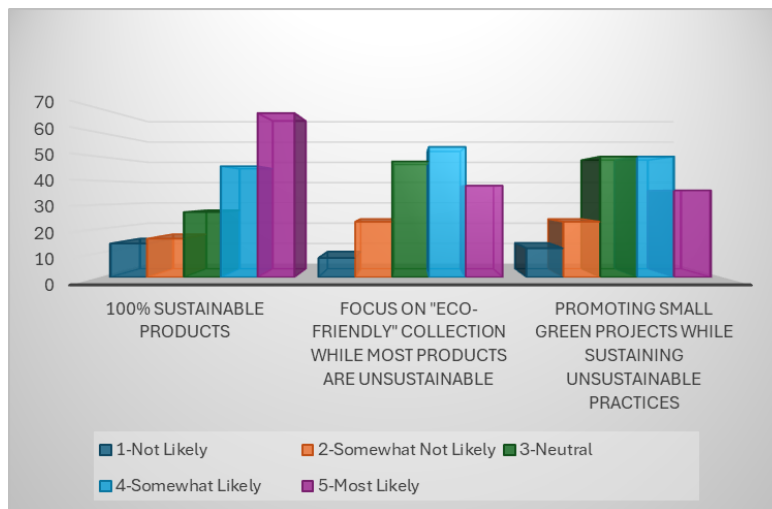
100% Sustainable Products: Most respondents fell into the Most Likely category, followed by Somewhat Likely and Neutral, indicating the strongest customer support for this strategy. This implies that fully sustainable product offerings are highly supported by consumers. The "Eco-Friendly" Collection Even Though Most Products Are Unsustainable: Reactions to this strategy are more diverse, with the Neutral, Somewhat Likely, and Somewhat Not Likely categories showing the most percentages. Few customers give it a Most Likely rating, suggesting pessimism regarding the small number of eco-friendly collections while most of the products are not sustainable. Encouraging Small Green Projects While Maintaining Unsustainable Practices: This strategy has elicited conflicting responses from consumers. With responses dispersed over other categories, the largest portion is Neutral. Significant doubt is present, as evidenced by the lower number of responders in the Most Likely category, displaying a lackadaisical attitude toward green initiatives while fundamental procedures are still not viable. Possible Interpretations of the Image: According to the graph, customers favour real, all-encompassing sustainability initiatives (such as completely sustainable items) over token or partial initiatives, including "eco-friendly" collections or minor green initiatives that ignore a company's overall unsustainable business practices.

This graph most likely comes from primary research that looks at customer choice and trust in connection to fast fashion firms' claims of sustainable marketing. According to the findings, consumers are less open to marketing tactics that can be perceived as "greenwashing"—that is, promoting sustainability in a constrained or surface-level manner—and are more supportive of companies that make complete, genuine commitments to sustainability.
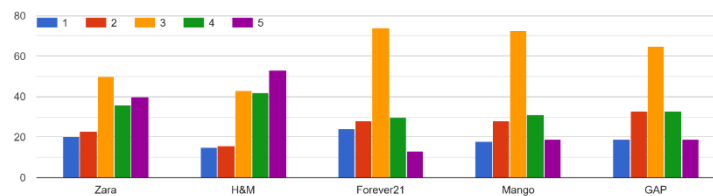
All brands have consistently high orange bars (rating 3), indicating that consumers usually consider these brands to be somewhat involved in sustainable marketing.

Zara and H&M's comparatively high purple bar presence (rating 5) would suggest that consumers view these companies as being more dedicated to sustainable marketing in a manner distinct from others.

This graph presumably originates from a primary research survey that examines public perceptions of sustainability initiatives undertaken by well-known fast fashion brands. The study likely seeks to investigate how consumers evaluate the authenticity or efficacy of these brands' sustainability assertions, which may be essential for comprehending consumer confidence in the fast fashion industry's dedication to sustainable practices.

4.3 Chi-Square Analysis
The results below were obtained by testing the connection between the variables using the chi-square test of independence, with the significance threshold set at 5%.

Hypothesis 1: There is no meaningful correlation between the level of recycling initiatives adopted by fast fashion brands and their reputation among consumers.

Variables: Level of Recycling, Brand Reputation
H0: The level of recycling initiatives is not associated with brand reputation
H1: The level of recycling initiatives is associated with brand reputation

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	46.722[a]	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	38.290	16	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	16.310	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	169		

Figure 2 *Chi-Square Test Analysis between Level of Recycling and Brand Reputation*

Interpretation of Chi-Square Test Results (Figure 2)
Pearson Chi-Square: Value = 46.722, Degrees of Freedom (df) = 16, and p-value (Asymptotic Significance) = 0.000. A significant p-value ($p < 0.05$) indicates that there is a statistically significant association between brand reputation and recycling behaviour.

Likelihood Ratio: Value = 38.290, df = 16, p-value = 0.001. Also significant, supporting the conclusion that there is a relationship between the brand reputation and level of recycling.

Linear-by-Linear Association: Value = 16.310, df = 1, p-value = 0.000. This suggests a significant linear trend, indicating that as one variable changes, the other may change in a linear pattern.

The significant Chi-Square test result (p < 0.05) suggests that brand reputation is related to recycling behaviour. Hence Null hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2: The implementation of green projects by fast fashion brands does not have a notable impact on their brand reputation among consumers.

Variables: green projects by fast fashion brands, Brand Reputation

H0: Green projects by fast fashion brands are not associated with brand reputation

H1: Green projects by fast fashion brands are associated with brand reputation

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	63.336ᵃ	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	44.703	16	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	11.924	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	169		

Figure 3 *Chi-Square Test Suggests a Relationship between Brand Reputation and Green Project Engagement.*

Interpretation of Chi-Square Test Results (Figure 3)

Pearson Chi-Square: Value = 63.336, Degrees of Freedom (df) = 16, and p-value (Asymptotic Significance) = 0.000. A significant p-value (p < 0.05) indicates a statistically significant association between brand reputation and engagement in green projects. Likelihood Ratio: Value = 44.703, df = 16, p-value = 0.000. Also significant, reinforcing the conclusion that there is an association between the two variables. Linear-by-Linear Association: Value = 11.924, df = 1, p-value = 0.001. This shows a significant linear trend, suggesting that as one variable changes, there is a potential linear relationship with the other variable.

The significant Chi-Square test result (p < 0.05), hence the null hypothesis is rejected, and alternative hypothesis stands true which suggests a relationship between brand reputation and green project engagement.

Hypothesis 3: The level of transparency in fast fashion brands does not have a meaningful impact on their reputation among consumers.

Variables: The level of transparency, Brand Reputation

H0: The level of transparency is not associated with brand reputation

H1: The level of transparency is associated with brand reputation

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	46.162ᵃ	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	34.874	16	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.378	1	.004
N of Valid Cases	169		

Figure 4 *Chi-Square test for Analysis of Correlation between Transparency and Brand Reputation*

Interpretation of Chi-Square Test Results (Figure 4)

Chi-Square Test Results suggest that Pearson's Chi-Square Value (is 46.162), and the p-value is 0.000. The significant p-value (p < 0.05) indicates a statistically significant association between brand reputation and transparency. Likelihood Ratio of 34.874, with a p-value of 0.004, and Linear-by-Linear Association of 8.378, with a p-value of 0.004 Also significant, reinforcing that there is a relationship between brand reputation and transparency.

Hypothesis 4: The sustainable marketing assertions made by fast fashion brands do not substantially differ from the genuine environmental friendliness of their products.

Variables: Sustainable Marketing, Ecofriendly

H0: Sustainable Marketing is not associated with ecofriendly status

H1: Sustainable Marketing is associated with ecofriendly status

		sustainable products	ecofreindly
sustainable products	Pearson Correlation	1	.737**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	169	169
ecofreindly	Pearson Correlation	.737**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	169	169

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 5 *Chi-Square Test for Analysis of Correlation between Transparency and Brand Reputation*

Interpretation of Chi-Square Test Results (Figure 5)

The correlation between sustainable products and their ecofriendly status significantly correlates with each other's and have the highest correlation score of .737 among other correlations in the dataset. The strong positive correlation (r = 0.737) and high level of statistical significance (p < 0.01) suggest a robust link between sustainable product preference and eco-friendly behaviour. Individuals that prefer sustainable items are likely to be concerned with environmentally friendly methods. Hence, the alternate hypothesis (H1) stands true which states sustainable marketing is associated with ecofriendly status.

5. Findings

The analysis of the collected data discloses that there is a strong association between the level of recycling initiatives taken by the fast fashion brands and their reputation among customers. Customers have a different mindset when looking for brands indulged in sustainable practices. The brands implementing green projects within their business operations are highly reputed among customers and thus have an increased brand value. Thus, going green with the business practices enhances a brand's value and defines its significant and unique propositions. Further, brands involved in greenwashing strategies to promote their products are hampering the level of transparency amongst the customers; thus, whenever the facts about such strategies are revealed, the extent to which these strategies are genuine is significantly associated with brand esteem. Therefore, it has become very important for the customers to become aware of what is happening in the business world in the name of sustainability.

6. Conclusion

To tackle the criticism from environmentalists and general consumers brands have started using sustainability measures like recycling, transparency, and green projects to prove themselves ecofriendly. Even after all of these efforts the reality is fast fashion is far from ecofriendly as it is still holding credit of one of the highest carbon emissions in environment (Rebekah Clarke, 2021). Greenwashing techniques and sustainability as a marketing tool can be a serious obstacle in achieving real sustainability (TerraChoice 2010). But efforts to lure consumer by showing itself eco-friendly does help the brands to build brand reputation. In this paper we have delineated the consumer opinion about the brand reputation, recycling, transparency and the green project initiatives taken by big brands. The results align with previous reports that most of the consumers know that sustainability claims are just to attract customers yet it there shopping behaviour somewhat remains unchanged (Chen & Chang, 2013b). Based on the data interpretation of the consumer responses it can be concluded that people do see the correlation between brand reputation, level of recycling, level transparency and green projects handled by brands. It eventually helps brand to build reputation as ecofriendly and sustainable fast fashion brand.

7. Acknowledgement

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