

Slowing Down Fast Fashion: An Evaluation of Environmental Initiatives

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Methodology & Methods

- I used a combination of positivist and constructivist methodology, meaning that I have looked for both observable truths and constructed meanings and narratives behind these facts.
- Literature review of environmental practices in the clothing industry.
- Review of companies' public platforms to observe public environmental commitments including:
 - websites
 - social media
 - environmental self-reporting
- Third party reports to examine the actual observed impacts of these initiatives.

Evaluation Criteria

- Company commitments to sustainability:
 - Emissions targets & other stated commitments
 - Is the progress on these commitments and is the implementation transparent?
- Third Party carbon footprints across the supply chain:
 - Material used in garments
 - Pollution from processing and transportation
 - Factory practices
- Disparity between commitments and actual footprint

Research Findings

- SHEIN:**
- SHEIN falls into the greenwashing trap as their environmental initiatives do not do enough to change the problematic model of fast fashion production.
 - SHEIN exchange and recycling programs are encouraging the reduction of waste, but only by offering store credit they are only encouraging further consumption of Shein products.
- Aritzia:**
- There is little disparity between environmental initiatives and third party reports but there are problematic components enmeshed in Aritzia's model.
 - Carbon markets are a problematic way of dealing with climate change as they have been shown to simply externalize costs onto producing countries who cannot afford to purchase carbon credits (Bachram, 2004)
- Patagonia:**
- There is minimal disparity between Patagonia's policies and actual environmental actions.
 - Patagonia demonstrates how the clothing industry can have positive and meaningful impacts on the environment when they step outside of the culture of consumerism to promote circularity (Rattalino, 2018).

Background Information

The fashion industry's negative environmental footprint is an undeniable fact. The industry is responsible for roughly 10% of global emissions and produces 92 million tonnes of textile waste per year, the same as one garbage truck full every second (Vicentini, 2021, pp. 30–31). Textile decomposition releases methane, a contributor to climate change (Vicentini, 2021, p. 31). Low quality clothing contains harmful chemicals to both the environment and our bodies (Agro, Cowley, & Matteis, 2021). These can be absorbed through our skin and contain carcinogens or hormone disruptors (Vicentini, 2021, p. 30). Washing synthetic fibers, particularly polyester, releases up to 700,000 microfibers in one wash which make their way into our oceans and rivers (Abidi, Acharya, Hu, & Rumi, 2021).

Research Questions

- What strategies are being put in place by large clothing manufacturers and retailers to make the industry more environmentally sustainable?
- Do these efforts truly mitigate the environmental impacts of the industry?
- Where are the disparities between the discourse that companies employ about their sustainability practices and their actual efforts to reduce environmental impacts?

Key Findings

- This research demonstrates that it is possible for companies to implement environmental policies that have positive and transformative impacts on their environmental footprint, however this is uncommon among many retailers.
- Successful environmental policies move beyond small or performative changes within the linear supply chain to build new supply chain patterns of circularity. These solutions reject the narrative of constant consumerism and create pathways for slower, sustainable consumption.



Patagonia

Commitments:

- Patagonia has been transferred to a nonprofit that works to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land (Gelles, 2023)
 - Founder Chouinard's move to "sell the company to the Earth" shows that Patagonia, a \$3 billion company, puts environmental sustainability at the forefront of their mission as a company (Gelles, 2023)
- Distinctly rejects greenwashing (The hidden cost of clothes, 2014)
- Promotion of circularity through use of recycled materials, promoting longevity of clothing through repair, Worn Wear campaign, the Footprint Chronicles, and "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign (Rattalino, 2018)
- Goal of carbon neutrality by 2025 (Kammen et al., 2018)

Third Party Reports:

- Uses Durable Water Repellent (DWR), a waterproofing material for high-performance gear, but this fluoropolymer-based chemical that can be harmful to the environment (O'Rourke & Strand, 2017).
- Otherwise, third party reports were consistent with Patagonia's stated commitments



Aritzia

Commitments:

- Motto is to provide everyday luxury and their minimalist appearance sends the subliminal message that buying from them is sustainable
- Has expressed their "continued commitment to the Ten Principles of the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC)" (Corporate responsibility, 2017, Reporting section)
- Their 2-step approach to sustainability is "1. Understanding our impact; 2. actioning meaningful change"
- Clearly laid out goals and measurable indicators
- Aim to achieve operational carbon neutrality by purchasing renewable energy credits and carbon offsetting credits (Aritzia ESG Report, 2021, p. 4)

Third Party Reports:

- It has proven difficult to find third-party credible reports on Aritzia's impact, which indicates that they have made efforts to control their own image.



SHEIN

Commitments:

- Reduction of GHG emissions by 25% by 2030 (SHEIN Group, 2022)
- Self-reported 2021 Carbon emissions: 6.3 million tonnes of CO2, most of this occurring "particularly in sourcing materials, manufacturing, and product distribution" (SHEIN Group, 2022, Measuring Our Impact section)
- "SHEIN Exchange" program: an online platform for reselling SHEIN clothing for credit or cash back to "build a future of fashion that is equitable for all, while also accelerating solutions to reduce textile waste" (Whinston in Roshitsh, 2022).
- Recycling programs allow customers to bring unwanted clothes to pop-up stores/events in exchange for SHEIN gift cards (SHEIN, Our Products)
- Company claims to be working to reduce emissions and impact by having shorter meetings and using automated systems (Our Products, 2023)

Third Party Reports:

- No third-party standardization (Vicentini, 2021. p. 53)
- CBC Marketplace investigation found Lead, PFAs and phthalates in SHEIN clothing at dangerous levels for both human health and environmental contamination (Agro, et al., 2021)
- Unsustainable business model that promotes waste and overconsumption (Vicentini, 2021, p. 54)
- "Careless attitude" towards human and environmental health (Greenpeace, 2022)



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