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The greenwashing phenomenon: An insight into young Finnish female purchase decision making

Bachelor's thesis

Programme International business administration, specialisation marketing

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Tallinn 2022

I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently

and all works, important standpoints, and data by other authors

have been properly referenced and the same paper

has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 9114 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

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ABSTRACT

The environmental cost of fast fashion and the misleading statements of the greenness of new garments are both continuously increasing. Greenwashing is being increasingly used as a successful marketing tool to achieve higher profits. Higher profits come at the expense of consumers' beliefs that they are purchasing an environmentally friendly product.

This thesis intends to analyse the far-reaching problem of companies promoting mass-produced fashion as being green to deceive environmentally conscious consumers into buying their products, and thereupon achieving higher profits. The aim of this thesis is to further research the phenomenon known as greenwashing and find out more about the effect it has on consumers' purchase decisions in the fashion industry. The author first starts by analysing the phenomenon of greenwashing and green statements used in marketing and how these affect consumers and their purchasing decisions. There are two research questions in order to answer the research problem. To answer the research questions, the author conducted four focus group interviews to gain qualitative data, which is then analysed by content analysis method.

The author will also present the findings of the interviews conducted and the thesis is ended with a conclusion. The main finding of this thesis is that young Finnish consumers' awareness on the phenomenon of greenwashing in the fashion industry was cursory, moreover they were eager to find out more and learn to be better informed.

Keywords: Greenwashing, fashion industry, consumer behaviour, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of environmental issues as concerns about global warming grow. They are seeking environmentally friendly items to make their contribution to the climate crisis, which is why companies are taking advantage of this knowledge. The practice of greenwashing was first coined by environmental activist Jay Westerfield in 1986, when hotels started requesting guests to reuse towels, claiming it was a new water conservation policy, despite the fact that there were no other environmental measures taken with more significant impact (Pearson, 2010:37). The fashion industry is a huge contributor to the climate- and ecological emergency, which is why many ecologically aware consumers prefer to purchase clothing that is produced sustainably and responsibly (Pattinson 2021). Greenwashing makes it difficult to divide the companies that are actually environmentally conscious and make an honest effort to provide green products from those who simply use the environmentally friendly wave as a profitability tool (Szabo, Webster 2021). Greenwashing can be described as misleading consumers regarding their environmental and ethical efforts (Parguel et al. 2011). Along with fast-fashion greenwashing contributes to ethical harm as well, because companies are making green marketing claims that are not reflective of their conduct. This kind of behaviour creates a false illusion that many companies are taking responsibility for the issues plaguing the fashion industry and taking measures to satisfy their more conscious consumers.

The issue that this thesis aims to address is that companies keep promoting mass-produced fashion as green to entice environmentally conscious consumers to purchase it, as well as using it as a tool to achieve higher profits. As the issue is prominent and continuously growing, researchers could play an important part in raising awareness by investigating the topic more. There are few qualitative studies on the relationship between greenwashing and consumer behaviour conducted in North Europe, this thesis is thus written in an effort to bridge this gap. Nowadays almost every product is labelled as ecological, therefore this research could help consumers recognize how greenwashing affects their consumption choices and help them in the future. This could also help marketers who are transparent in their actions and help in providing information in a way that does not seem too overloading and difficult for their target consumers. The motivation behind

conducting this paper is the feeling of frustration caused by companies that provide misinformation for the consumers.

This study aims to research greenwashing further and find out more about how this phenomenon affects the purchasing decisions consumers make, particularly in the fashion industry. This study will focus on the greenwashing phenomenon in the fashion industry, because the ecological movement in the fashion industry is gaining popularity. Therefore, it is important to establish more knowledge on the topic to avoid greenwashed purchase decisions from happening. In order to conduct the research, the following two research questions are formed for the study.

1. How aware are young Finnish consumers of the negative environmental impacts of greenwashing in the fashion industry and being impacted by this phenomenon?
2. What role does greenwashing play in consumers' purchase decision of sustainable fashion?

The first section of this thesis will be a literature review, where an insight of sustainable purchase decision making is presented, followed by an overview of perceived greenwashing and the outcomes of greenwashing from the consumer's point of view. Then the author will introduce the concept of green claims with supporting examples of green claims in the fashion industry and explanations on the type of issues these claims are causing. In addition, previous studies related to the topic will be presented in the same section. The second section will be the research methodology, which will be composed of the design, sample, as well as data collection, and justification of the qualitative content analysis method.

In order to obtain qualitative data on the subject, in-depth interviews were conducted. The subjects of the interviews were young Finnish females between the ages of 20 and 25, from various parts of the country. The interviews were conducted online, and this primary data obtained from the interviews was used to learn more about the participants' fashion consumption patterns, to gain a better grasp of the thought process behind their fashion purchasing decisions and to learn about their views regarding greenwashing. Academic papers and books will be used as secondary data. The paper will use both primary and secondary data to answer the research questions. In the third section, the results of the study, discussion, and recommendations for the future are provided. Lastly, this paper will end with a conclusion.

The author of this paper would like to thank her supervisor, Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo, for guiding and supporting her throughout the writing process. In addition, the author is grateful for all the interviewees for participating and making the research possible.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial intention of this literature review is to help the reader to understand the results of the study. Before opening the concept of "perceived greenwashing" and explaining the possible outcomes of this phenomenon, it is important to grasp the idea on how and why consumers make their purchasing decisions. Greenwashing is examined from the perspective of consumer behaviour and how it affects their decision-making. Then the paper continues to present Szabo and Webster's (2020) model on the different shades of greenwashing. This will provide a broad overview of the topic and are relevant to know when conducting the interviews. The paper examines consumers' perceptions on different sides of greenwashing, in order to understand what factors affect the purchase decisions of green claimed products. The third subsection gives more detailed information on green claims and examples of green claimed products and behaviour. Then in the last subsection, previous studies that are relevant for this specific study are presented.

1.1. Sustainable fashion purchase decision

Sustainable fashion consumption is described as having many purposes, which are the main reasons why consumers are driven towards it in the first place. Fashion in general is a powerful tool for self-expression and of aesthetic pleasure, moreover sustainable consumption can bring out togetherness for having similar values, furthermore, can reduce guilt of previous poor environmental choices. However sustainable consumption of fashion can also feel as an obligation towards the environment and a burden for social acceptance (Jägel, 2012).

Consumers' purchase decision-making can be impacted by different factors, such as their cultural background, social, personal and psychological factors. The underlying beliefs, desires and preferences that a consumer has are usually learned from their family and key individuals around them and these form the cultural factors affecting purchasing behaviours. Cultural background is also an elemental cause for the consumer's motives. Social characteristics play an important role

in purchasing decisions as many consumers are seeking acceptance from the people around them and the people seen on social media are creating the image that many consumers are aspiring to be. Another component impacting these decisions is the psychological factors that take into account the motivations and perceptions consumers might have. (Kotler et al. 2019: 144-157.) These perceptions are a way to collect information and make assumptions based on the attitude consumers have established in previous experiences either directly or indirectly from others (Ibid). Consumption on the whole is based on the lifestyles and images people are trying to achieve and when consumers are aspiring to have a greener lifestyle, they tend to consume products that associate with these values of environmental friendliness (Solomon 2017:259-260). These factors that affect the purchasing decision are closely linked to each other as their core values could drive the motivation to consume (Solomon, 2017:173).

Many studies acknowledge the theory of "Planned behaviour" (TPB), developed by Ajzen, as an integral part of consumer decision-making. According to this theory the attitude a consumer holds towards a company or their product influences their purchase decision. In addition, subjective norms, such as how other people view sustainability and purchasing eco-friendly products impact the consumer's behaviour (Kalafatis et al. 1999). The stronger the consumer perceives that they can make a difference by purchasing more sustainably, the more motivated they are to continue making these sustainable purchase decisions (Ibid.).

According to the means-end chain theory by Gutman (1982), consumers are looking for items with certain characteristics and when they are asked why they purchased the precise product, consistently, the response is associated with a product attribute (Kahle, Gurel-Atay, 2013: 6). This theory is a technique for understanding consumers' decision making by evaluating the values they want to achieve and the consequences of their actions when trying to achieve these goal values (Jägel, 2012).

1.2. Perceived greenwashing

As a response to the increasing number of green consumers and their concern for the environment, businesses are seeking ways to be perceived as more environmentally conscious and to promote the value of their green brand (Avcilar, Demirgunes, 2017). Green consumers prioritize quality and price when choosing a product as well as promote products and brands that are concerned for

the environment and implement protection towards it in their actions (Martinez et al. 2020). Consumers who have a more ecological view on the world, also have more environmentally concerned beliefs and attitudes, therefore are more inclined to purchase greener products (Szabo, Webster, 2020). Thus, making these consumers more ambiguous, complex, and requiring more product information (Turnbull et al. 2000). Mustola (2020) explains the main idea of green marketing and green products in her study: green marketing is a way to promote products that are deemed "safe for the environment" (Mustola 2020: 9). Green marketing can be practised in a wide variety of ways, including modification of products, changing the manufacturing processes or changing packaging, thus resulting in possible adjustments in advertising or promoting either the green actions taken or the elimination of harmful ones (Aagerup et al. 2019). Greenwashing and green marketing can be viewed as the two sides of the same coin, making it difficult for consumers to tell them apart.

Avcilar and Demirgunes (2017) gathered the definition of consumer confusion as the consumer's failure to develop a correct and true understanding regarding the different aspects of a product. They also discovered that greenwashing is positively associated with green consumer confusion and green perceived risk, which would negatively affect green trust (Avcilar, Demirgunes, 2017). Consumer confusion occurs when the consumer is not able to develop an understanding of the environmental features (Szabo, Webster, 2020). Therefore, for businesses "to reduce the negative relationship between greenwashing and green trust, they should decrease their consumers' green consumer confusion and green perceived risk" (Chen, Chang, 2013:489). When consumer confusion and mistrust arise, consumers tend to be suspicious of green products in general and this may result in a destruction of the market for green goods. (Su, Chang, 2017). In other words, there could be an overload of information, which makes it difficult to evaluate the product and be confident that the product is environmentally friendly. When the available information is too much and too difficult to understand and process, consumer confusion arises. Consumers' awareness of the environment and the availability of coherent information could increase their scepticism towards green claims, making it easier for them to spot fraudulent marketing content (Szabo, Webster, 2020).

According to Aji and Sutikno (2015), green trust is based on consumers' previous experiences and perceptions of the company, their brand, and products. Consumers are more sceptical of advertisements due to growing concerns about their credibility. They believe that advertising that asserts a product's quality, particularly in terms of environmental friendliness, cannot be trusted.

Consumer purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by their views of advertisements, and if a brand is perceived favourably, consumers could have a higher tendency to be loyal to them, thus continuing to purchase from them without considering other options (Aji, Sutikno, 2015). This kind of brand loyalty could gain the company a competitive advantage in the market (Su, Chang, 2017). Whereas green risk can occur when a consumer recognizes a potential consequence for making a poor decision (Aji, Sutikno, 2015). Green risk is based on the perceptions of the company that the consumer already has, but in addition, consumer behaviour has been frequently studying perceived risk and it is proven to be part of shaping the purchasing decisions that consumers make (Chaudhuri 1997). Based on this knowledge, perceiving a brand as risky could culminate in avoidance of their products and possibly the brand altogether. Aji and Sutikno (2015) collected a few causing factors that build-up green perceived risk from different studies. Perceived risk of the products increases when the consumer is highly involved and attached to the product, especially when the purchase is important to the consumer. When a product is new to the market, there is little information about it, which makes it difficult to evaluate both it and the brand. Both perceived risk and confusion are on the rise when there are other variations of a similar product and if there is a lot of information about it, thus leading to confusion of where to purchase such a product and what information to trust (Aji, Sutikno, 2015). When consumers are confused on where to buy and who to trust, they are not able to separate the companies that are transparent and truthful in their actions from the ones intentionally using greenwashing. Sustainable companies are now overlooked as too expensive and will not make it in the competition inside the market. (Chen, Chang 2013). Both the consumers and sustainable companies would benefit from learning how green claims and greenwashing are used in marketing.

1.3. Green claims in the fashion industry

Manufacturers create advertising that makes eco-friendly or green promises to target people that live a green lifestyle to sell these items. Green marketing is often regarded as the most effective method for responding to market demands (Aji, Sutikno, 2015). The term "green claim" refers to the practice of implying or otherwise generating the appearance that a product or service is environmentally friendly or less harmful to the environment than rival goods or services (Chen, Chang, 2013). In the fashion industry, green claims are a widely used marketing strategy to improve sales. There is no explicit EU legislation that harmonises environmental marketing.

(European Commission, Website), which is a sign that greenwashing is still a phenomenon that is neither taken seriously nor on which there is enough information.

According to Aagerup et al. (2019) there are two ways to position green claims, rational or emotional claims. Typical rational green claims are that their product is better or greener than other similar products or brands in the market. Emotional claims, on the other hand, encourage consumers to act more responsibly by purchasing their products (Aagerup et al. 2019). Moreover, there are two types of claims: visual claims and claims based on language (Kahle, Gurel-Atay, 2015;50-51). Visual claims have certain colours and images that are indicating that the product could be more ecological and for green marketed products it is generally green. It is also scientifically proven that colours can alter emotions and a study found that desired consumer behaviours were evaluated to be positive when the context was presented with a green background (Goldsmith et al. 2014 referenced in Solomon, 2017:101). Language based claims use words to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Kahle, Gurel-Atay, 2015;50-51). These green claims can be found on product labels, packaging, and even related literature and advertising (The Committee on Consumer Policy, 2010:3). In the fashion industry, green claims are most common in campaigns, promotional and sales materials, and other types of marketing, such as clothing lines. They "can take the form of words, symbols, emblems, logos, graphics, colours, and product brand names" (Ibid.).

Greenwashing can appear in many different forms and all of them result in making it difficult for consumers to determine whether they are consuming honest and responsible products or being targets of false and misleading advertising. Greenwashing can happen in any part of the supply chain process, therefore fashion brands are able to claim all sorts of green statements, because the message may be truthful, but the wrongdoing is happening elsewhere in the process, for instance, in the salaries and working conditions the employees have or in the materials they use (Martinez et al. 2020). Many brands offer discounts if a customer brings an old item of clothing for recycling purposes, however taking into consideration that most of these brands are fast fashion, the item will likely end up in a landfill as waste, and the discount functions as an incentive to purchase more from the brand (H&M, Website). This kind of behaviour could result in a sequence of actions, where the consumer could interpret the above-mentioned situation as a green action and then find the usage of the discount appropriate.

The most common material used in garments are synthetic materials, such as polyester, nylon and acrylic, thus 62% of the textile fibres used in the whole world in 2020 were synthetic fibres (Textile Exchange, 2021:10). These materials contain microfibers, which are harmful for the environment and are washed off from products to the oceans and air. These materials are affordable and easily available for the fashion industry to use (Plastic soup foundation, 2021). A non-profit organisation the Changing Markets Foundation, conducted a questionnaire in 2021 on 36 known European and UK fashion brands. This study showed that 39% of the products they produced had a sustainability claim and 59% in some way violated green-claims guidelines made by the UK Competition and Markets Authority (Synthetics anonymous, 2021). In addition to the questionnaire, the Changing Markets Foundation also compared different brands, which have dedicated a collection for responsible and eco-friendliness. They intended to state the sustainability claims different companies make. They made a comparison between some very well-known fast-fashion brands: ASOS, H&M, Zalando and Zara, and compared their main collections and the responsible edit. The author selected and compiled these brands on table 1. that are accessible to Finnish consumers and are likely to have purchased from at some point of their lives.

Table 1. Synthetic use in different clothing brands.

Brand	Main collection	Green collection
ASOS	77% of polyester	64% polyester, 9% recycled synthetics
H&M	68% of polyester, 2% recycled synthetics	61% of polyester, 32% recycled synthetics
Zalando	52% polyester, 10% recycled synthetics	56% polyester, 18% recycled synthetics
Zara	58% polyester, 2% recycled synthetics	27% polyester, 12% recycled synthetics

Source: Synthetics anonymous (2021). Compiled by the author.

The comparisons between the above-mentioned brands show that the collections are quite similar to each other, when comparing the percentage of different materials used, which indicates that they are falsely promoting the clothing lines as green and sustainable, even though the data does not corroborate this fact. H&M also states that to qualify for their conscious collection "the product must contain at least 50% sustainable materials, such as organic cotton and recycled polyester" (H&M, Website). In table 1, we can clearly assume that H&M has a false claim, since the product information states otherwise as the majority of the materials used in the green collection are

polyester. Typically, in fast fashion the products are mass-produced and sold at a decent price, thus culminating in the usage of more affordable synthetic fabrics. Based on this table 1, we can assume that greenwashing is a growing trend and companies are more and more willing to sacrifice their transparency to increase their profitability.

1.4. Related literature

Over the years, the number of green messages used in advertising has increased significantly, making it one of the most often used mechanisms for communicating green messages to consumers and yet it does not always have the effect that is hoped for (Nyilasy et al. 2014). In this particular case it is important to look at the organisation's point of view and how they practise greenwashing and green marketing. Szabo and Webster (2020) introduced their conceptual model of the shades of greenwashing that were based on the results of their conducted interview, presented in the figure 1. The different shades of greenwashing demonstrated how transparent companies are in their environmental actions and how sustainable their products were compared to their green marketing. They discovered that different organisations have many perspectives on how they view green marketing.

Figure 1. Shades of greenwashing.
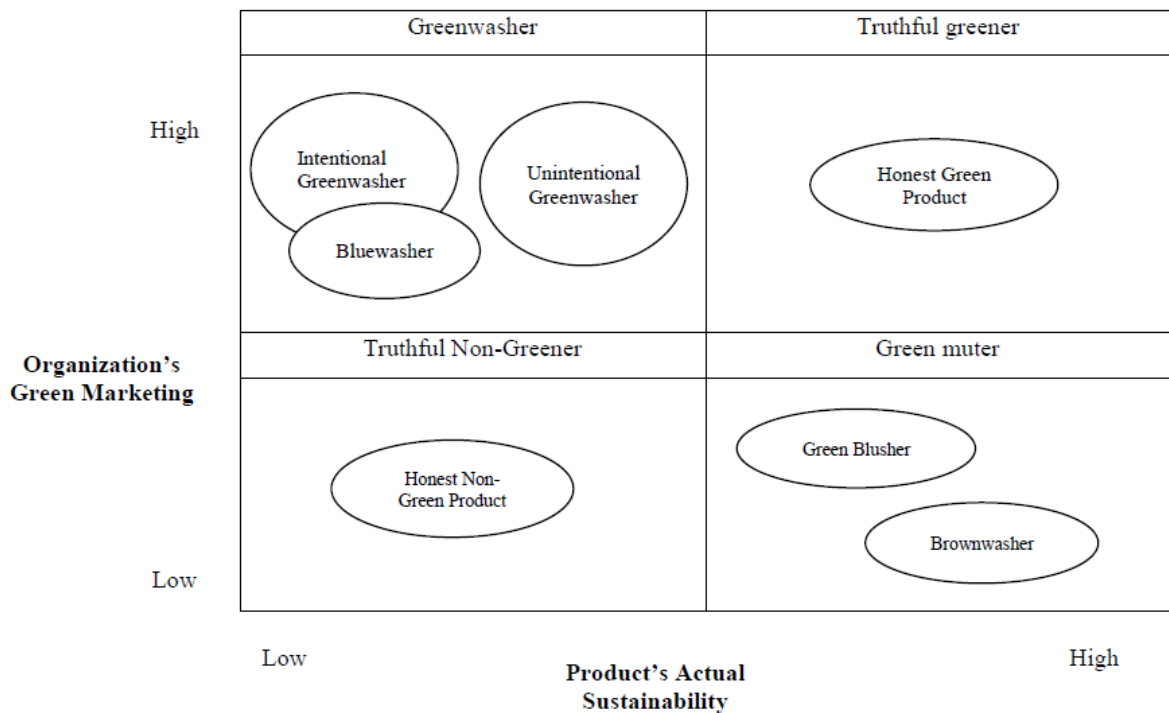
Source: Szabo and Webster (2020). Modified by the author.

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The four shades of greenwashing and their meaning can be clearly observed in figure 1. The first is intentional greenwashing, which is seen as the worst form of green marketing as someone is purposely trying to promote green actions without actually implementing them. Then there is unintentional greenwashing, where the greenwashing is born from a different part of the organisation, for instance, from their supply chains. The idea of the matrix is to show how there are different ways to see greenwashing and green marketing and how the transparency changes with different actions. As can be seen from figure 1, there are also companies that are green in their actions, but do not promote these actions publicly to the customers. The subject of eco-friendliness is extremely sensitive, which is why these green muters could be hiding their green actions, in order to avoid conflict with possible investors or customers (Kim, Lyon, 2015). This could also be caused by unawareness of how green their actions are leading to not disclosing the fact that they are green (Szabo, Webster, 2020).

According to Szabo and Websters' (2020) study on website interactivity, consumers' perceptions of greenwashing have a tendency to decrease when the website has higher interactivity and information is more easily available. This creates a herd effect, where other consumers' interest in the website allures the consumer to interact with it as well. The same goes for green products, when a big group of people perceives greenwashing to be positive, they tend to purchase it and trust the company. Thus, green marketing claims are seen as more credible and this diminishes the perceived greenwashing the product or company holds (Szabo, Webster, 2020).

Both the conceptual model of the shades of greenwashing and the study on website interactivity by Szabo and Webster (2020) provided complementary information on greenwashing. Companies that are transparent about their actions and the amount of information they provide to their customers, have a tendency to increase their customers' interest in them.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The second chapter contains the research methodology. In this section the research planning phase is discussed as is the justification for the choice of a qualitative method and the selection of the interviewees. Thereafter, there will be a description of how the data is collected and analysed.

2.1. Research plan

The aim of this research is to find out how aware young Finnish females are of the greenwashing phenomenon and the issues arising from it. Moreover, this thesis intends to uncover the links between greenwashing and consumer's purchase decision, therefore aiming to stimulate conversation and possibly make an impact on their future purchase decision making. Due to the immense amount of green advertising in the fashion industry, the most suitable target group for this research are young Finnish female consumers.

Most of the research done on greenwashing is quantitative, which is why it would be valuable to gain qualitative data on the subject. Despite the narrow amount of qualitative research done on this topic, qualitative interviews are a prominent method for research (Eriksson, Kovalainen, 2016: 78-96). "Qualitative research contributes to an understanding of the human condition in different contexts and of a perceived situation" (Bengtsson 2016: 8). According to Bengtsson (2016) the most appropriate qualitative method for collecting and analysing this specific data is content analysis, because its inductive reasoning enables the researcher to draw conclusions based on the data collected and integrate it into theories. This type of reasoning is based on the idea of analysing the text with an open mind and this way allows the creation of fresh and meaningful results as well as answering the research question. (Bengtsson 2016.)

With quantitative research it can be difficult to gain perspective on consumers' attitudes and beliefs, and even more difficult to leave an impact on the participants of the research topic. As the main reason for the research is to find out more about the consumer's point of view and the thought

process behind the purchase decisions of sustainable fashion, a quantitative method would not give the result the paper is searching for. In quantitative research, for instance, in surveys, researchers use a random sampling method, where anyone can access it and there is no control over who takes part in the survey (Flick, 2018:87-88). In qualitative research, it is popular to use purposive sampling strategy, where the participants are hand-picked by different criteria. (Flick, 2018:88-89). Previous studies have recommended a minimum sample size of 12 people to reach data saturation in a qualitative study, therefore forming three interview groups of four participants is sufficient enough to develop an understanding of the phenomenon also taking into account the scale of this study (Vasileiou et al. 2018). In an interview, the researcher is able to select the sample of the participants, which is crucial for the study's accuracy as the participants should be ecologically aware and take sustainable factors into consideration when making fashion purchases. The criteria for selecting the participants of the interviews were that they should consider themselves as ecologically aware and they should also fit the demographic profile of a young Finnish female. Suitable candidates were sought out by actions of word of mouth, where the moderator asked acquaintances whether they knew people who met the criteria, moreover it was important that the interviewees were not close to the moderator, thus not aware of the actual topic of the research.

2.2. Data collection and analysis of data

For collecting the data, three focus group interviews were conducted and each of the interviews had four participants. The participants were between the ages of 20 to 25 and were either students or full-time employees. In order to achieve more varied results, the participants were from different parts of Finland. The interviews focused around the previously stated research questions formulated for this thesis, moreover the main goal was to discuss the topics of greenwashing and their purchase decisions first separately and then connect them later during the interviews. Before the interviews, the moderator created a mutual online group for each interview to share the link for the online meeting and give instructions before the actual interview, and they were also explained that the interviews are completely anonymous. In the beginning of each interview the moderator reassured the interviewees to be completely honest and not to answer based on what they thought the moderator wanted to hear. The moderator prepared a guide for the interview questions; therefore, the interviews were semi-structured, however each interview was adjusted according to the discussions. The interviews began with a warming phase by touching the topics on sustainability and environmental friendliness, followed by a discussion about their purchasing

habits and values regarding the environment. Then in the third part of the interview, greenwashing was introduced. Lastly, the objection for the closing phase was to review the discussed subjects and how this interview could affect their future behaviour. The interviewees did not know the topic of this research beforehand, therefore the moderator inspired them to express their opinions on anything that comes to their mind related to the questions asked.

Interviewing was selected as the method for the research as it allows the moderator to collect non-verbal information, such as mannerisms and moreover it provides the opportunity to clarify if something is not understood. The moderator guided the conversation in a way the participants were able to discuss freely, but in a structured manner. The interview questions were open ended and formulated in a way that one-word responses would not be sufficient. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2011:80) emphasised that the moderator should be concerned if the participants interviewed could directly answer the questions asked. The questions of the interviews were formed to support the research questions, raise awareness of the topic and to favour the creation of a discussion. In order to achieve a good discussion, the interviews were conducted in Finnish, which is the most natural language for the participants. The interviews provided 30 pages of data that were transcribed from the recordings of the interviews and the interviews lasted approximately between 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted through the online platform called Zoom. The parts of the interview deemed relevant to the paper were translated from Finnish into English and were presented in the results section of the thesis as citations. Transcriptions were written by the moderator to avoid losing valuable data and were written a day after each interview.

The analysis of the data began with decontextualizing of the entire text into keywords by reading through the transcripts of the interviews and identifying these keywords, also known as codes (Bengtsson, 2016). Then these codes were recontextualized into categorised groups with similar context, followed by a formulation of bigger themes from these categories allowing different perspectives to emerge and compare (Ibid.). Dividing the data into different themes, will allow the author to analyse the data in a new perspective and help in thinking and discussing the topic (Graneheim, Lundman, 2004). These themes constituted the arrangement of the findings in chapter 3, which are combined to give answers to the research questions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part of this thesis presents results from the interviews and for the overall research. The goal is to provide answers to the research questions mentioned above as well as create a discussion about the results, possible limitations and further recommendations. In the next sections, the author goes through the results of the study with main themes on awareness of sustainability and the environmental impact, the process of purchase-decision-making, social media as a tool for advertising, and lastly greenwashing as a business tool. Under each theme, there are categories and codes which have been used for analysing the data and the factors that have formed the current outlook of the results.

3.1. Awareness of sustainability and the environmental impact

The conducted interviews discovered certain patterns and ideologies based on their awareness of greenwashing and its impact on their behaviour and on the environment. Predominantly, they understood the elemental issues regarding the environment and the fashion industry, but as far as greenwashing goes, their knowledge was superficial. As a topic, even informed consumers must continue to remind themselves and others about these issues, in order for the topic to remain relevant to them.

The interviews began by discussing different values related to sustainability and environmental friendliness. The most common value that came up was recycling both waste and clothing. When discussing the values, they genuinely implement regularly, the comment amount declined, nevertheless recycling and purchasing clothing second-hand were prominent. However, two of the twelve participants have changed their diet to a vegetarian one, to preserve the environment and animals. Non-green consumption was regarded as something to be judged and being scared to be judged by others, which would lead to guilt when consuming non-green options.

"I feel guilty almost every time I eat meat or buy something new, and then I try to compensate it by doing something good" -Focus group 2

In addition to feeling guilt towards these actions, there was a significant difference between the participants that were employed compared to the participants that are still students when talking about the possibility of purchasing with the green intention. When discussing the consumption habits of the interviewees and the people they know of, the words trend and trendy were mentioned frequently. The moderator found out that environmental actions and green consumptions were considered being in style as it would be any other clothing trend that would go in and out of style. The reason for shopping fast fashion even with the knowledge that it might not be the best for the environment was that it is always changing according to the present trends.

"It is trendy to be interested on environmental issues" - Focus group 3

"Fast fashion clothing is always on trend, which is why people want to buy it." - Focus group 3

The popularity of second-hand shopping was also raised during the discussion, most of the participants practised second-hand shopping and admitted that it could turn into overconsumption of the re-used options, due to the more affordable prices and the idea of that being better for the environment.

"I feel like, specially, among younger people, we are more aware of environmental issues and truly want to make an impact on them, but I also feel like the awareness has grown and you can see it from people's behaviour, for instance, buying clothes from flea markets is popular, and the whole phenomenon has grown as a trend" -Focus group 1

"Fashion is changing all the time, before we had spring, summer, autumn and winter collections, but nowadays trends change only after two weeks. The ones who are really interested and want to keep up with fashion are probably motivated by this to purchase new clothing." -Focus group 2

The moderator asked the interviewees whether they had heard of the term "greenwashing" and everyone concurred, but when they were asked to explain the meaning, only one interviewee out of twelve was able to explain it correctly. The second group were more aware of the meaning of greenwashing, but still agreed on being impacted by it when they were younger, but not nowadays.

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The interviewees were unable to give real examples of where and how to spot greenwashing. After hearing their responses, the moderator explained the term without naming actual examples, thus being able to repeat a similar question about it later during the interview, which will be further discussed in the next sub-section. The interviewees concentrated more on their feelings towards greenwashing and the negative impact that is caused to them personally. They did not quite understand the extent of the harm greenwashing may cause to the environment in the long run.

3.2. Consumer purchase-decision-making

To help understand how aware the consumers are on environmental issues and on greenwashing, it is important to understand the different consumer segments and how and why they behave as they do. In general, when discussing their consumption habits and those of their acquaintances the responses were quite superficial. The wants and perceptions were similar, but the actual action conducted was stronger with employed participants. Based on the interview, a matrix explaining the shades of consumers and their green efforts was formed. This matrix was inspired by Szabo and Webster's (2020) theory on shades of greenwashing mentioned in the literature review, in section 1.3. and will function as the author's theoretical contribution for this thesis.

Figure 2. Shades of green consumption.
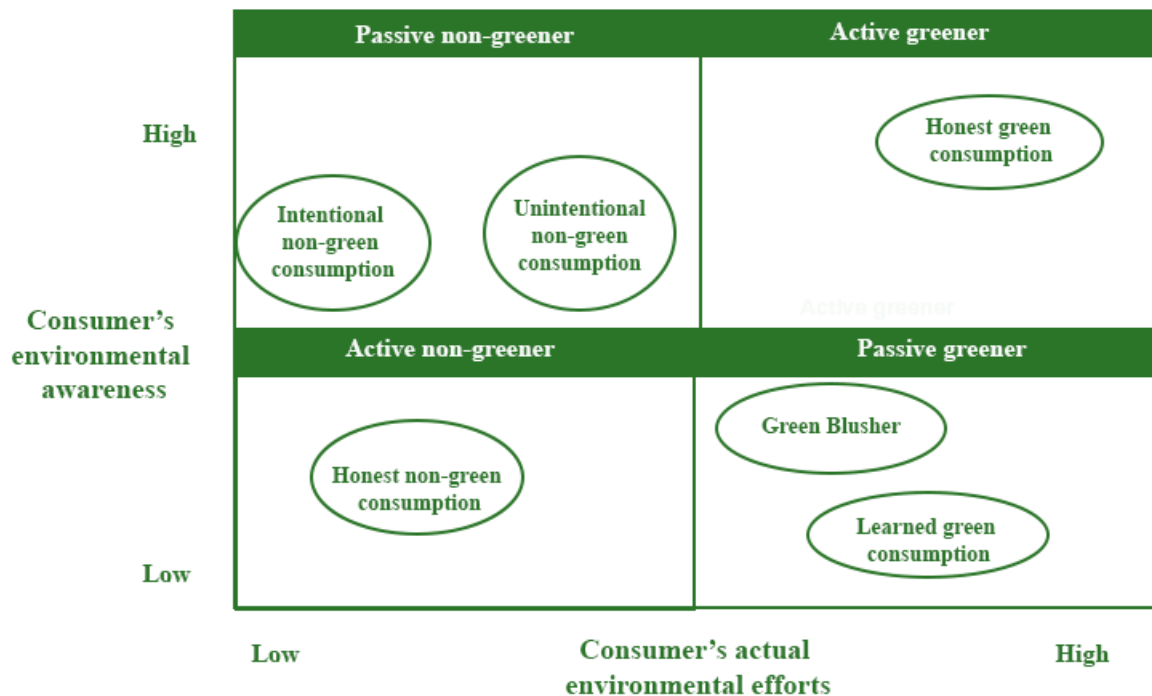
Source: Szabo and Webster (2020). Adapted by the author.

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The findings of this interview illustrated how consumers can be divided into segments based on their consumption behaviour. Figure 2 shows four main categories: passive non-greener, active non-greener, active greener and passive greener. The intentional non-green consumer, which describes the consumers who are aware of environmental issues and are not doing anything for one reason or another. In one of the interviews, the participants discussed how selfish people can be and how people have a habit of putting their own needs before the common needs. Then there is the unintentional non-green consumer, who could be uneducated to know better, thus continuing to consume irresponsibly. Honest green consumers are environmentally aware and behave according to their values. The pattern of learned green consumption is also supported by the impact of the cultural background on purchase decisions mentioned previously in section 1.1.

"Little environmentally aware people, that do just the things they have learned from previous behaviour or from their families, are usually doing only those things and don't pay attention to other possibilities." -Focus group 2

"I feel like many people have learned to do certain things related to environmentally friendliness, for example, recycling, but then they could lack interest, or they lack awareness of their own behaviour and can't recognize what is actually ecological. Interest and re-acquisition of information is what is lacking from many people and they would be able to do so much more." - Focus group 2

The question about participants' consumer journey was the most difficult to demonstrate, because the moderator did not want to provide any ideas about what the interviewees could be looking for at a certain website, which caused difficulties in understanding the question, but moderator was able to receive interesting views on it either way.

"I typically go online shopping with a certain need in mind, but while exploring the websites I can get sudden ideas for needing something else, also websites have a broad selection of clothing and I don't like walking around actual shops. I used to make time for shopping just for fun and I didn't really need anything. Nowadays I have a need before shopping, most of the time." - Focus group 1

"I do not shop online that much, because I don't like return policies and if something doesn't fit, you are forced to return it. Now that I think about it, the last time I considered online shopping was today, because I needed a winter coat. Typically, I will shop online, when I need something and then I think about the

possible brands that could have similar clothing that I am searching for. When I am on the website, I pay attention to what the clothing looks like, how much it costs and also read about their sustainability policies. If I am seriously looking for something and all of the criteria match, I will make the purchasing decision easily." -Focus group 3

The interviewees had similar values and how they implemented these values in their lives, which is why it was feasible to compose a common means-end value chain by Gutman (1982) that is presented in figure 3. When the interviewees were asked which factors affect the purchasing decision, the mean-end chain theory was used as a tool for achieving results. They all described different attributes that contributed to their final purchase-decision.

Figure 3. Means-end value chain.
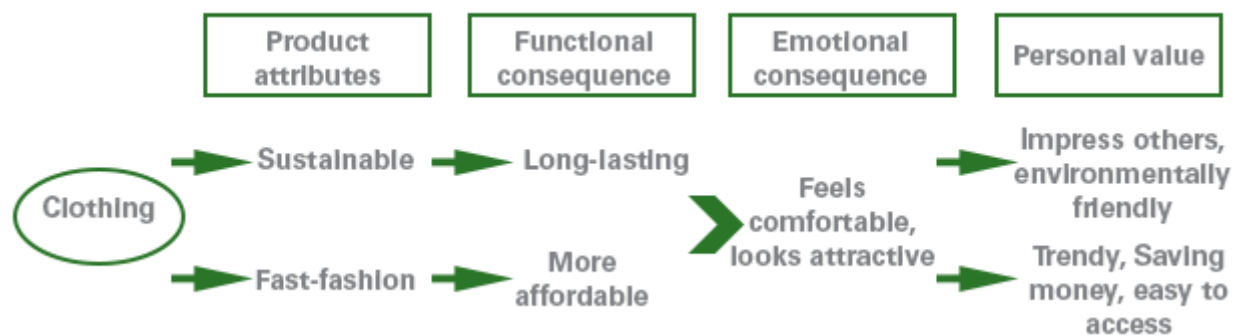
Source: Gutman (1982). Adapted by the author.

Analysing the information that arose from the interviews, it became apparent that buying sustainable clothing requires more research and is typically a need that is used repeatedly. Based on the purchasing habits of the participants, it became evident that both, fast-fashion and sustainable purchases should be included in figure 3. The interviewees agreed that they are open to spending more time and money in finding a piece of clothing that meets the criteria of quality, sustainability, and physical appearance. Figure 3 shows that alluring factors in fast-fashion clothing are prices and the possibility to stay on top of current trends. Fashion trends are changing remarkably fast, which makes the purchasing of sustainable fashion inaccessible to people with lower income or students as well as environmentally aware consumers who would not consume that often. The change between who valued which factors varied between the interviewees and some preferred sustainability over prices and some the other way around, which could be explained by their demographic segmentation as some are students and some employed workers. In the first interview, all interviewees brought to attention the difference between long-lasting clothing that is

part of the core of their wardrobes and seasonal clothing and how they are more willing to make one-time investments for their core clothing, but not for seasonal clothing as they are not used often. The main personal values, also explained as end goals that these purchase choices exposed were to impress others, being environmentally friendly and for fast-fashion purchases the end goals were to be trendy, save money and easily access current trends.

The process of how consumers make their purchasing decisions is far more complex than the interviewees were able to explain, thereby using different figures to analyse their discussion gave more depth to the findings. The shades of green consumption provided a theoretical contribution to understanding the different types of consumers, followed by the means-end value chain that described the reasoning for the consumption decisions the interviewees make.

3.3. Social media as a tool for marketing

There was a clear connection between all of the interviewees and their use of social media. Nowadays advertisements on social media are optimised with algorithms to match each of their searches and interests, which is why most of them were quite pleased with ads that are shown to them on a daily basis.

"I currently have no negative image of any brand nor am I annoyed by any advertisements. I think it is quite efficient when you can see between Instagram stories advertising and if there is something interesting, it does not require much effort for me to browse the page." -Focus group 1

The moderator came to a conclusion that the interviewees personally did not shop for new clothing that often but considered many other women in their age doing so much more often. Social media was regarded as the main reason for the huge consumption of clothing. Social media influencers are paid to promote certain brands and with the power they hold over their followers, people are easily intrigued to dress as them, particularly so, when there is a discount offer involved.

"It is precisely social media that is the reason why people shop more and that influencers have discount codes and different promotions. It is easy to buy online and there are many influencers online who offer different discounts, so why wouldn't people buy. -Focus group 1,

"I personally get really annoyed by all of the advertisements, where you are offered cheap clothing and promote them "With this code xx, you can get 20% off your next purchase". I am also frustrated by the fact that influencers do not take any responsibility and they have a lot of followers and people are immediately placing orders online because of them." -Focus group 2

Social media is the new platform generating social pressure. Consumers are continuously surrounded by images on what they should wear and how they should behave. Advertisements and influencers are creating inspiration for additional consumption and they have altered their communication on showing the options, for instance, how to style a product with a direct link to the product itself, conveying them to consume more. The interviewees were encouraged to analyse their own thoughts during the interview and one participant came to the conclusion that boredom increases the amount of social media and website use, which leads to more screen time being influenced by all of the inspiration and promoted products.

The interviewees were provided with visual examples of greenwashing in order to demonstrate how greenwashing can appear in even the smallest details. The participants felt frustration towards the presented green statement and explained how they really did not know who and what to trust. When asked whether they felt they have been impacted by greenwashing, the first group denied it and when explaining all the ways they could be impacted by it, they realised they were wrong. The interviewees were shown Figure 1 from section 1.2. to explain more understandably how closely greenwashing could impact them. This moment during the interviews was extremely important regarding the primary goal of the interview, thus raising awareness and realisation of their previous actions and affecting their future purchase decision-making.

3.4. Greenwashing as a business tool

The fashion industry's sustainability and environmental friendliness raised a polite debate, since some of the participants anticipated it to be possible for the industry to change and be environmentally friendly as the other side thought that it is not possible to completely change as it would require a complete redesign of the industry and changing the type of products they sell altogether.

"I think it is likely that greenwashing will grow in the upcoming years as awareness of environmental issues will become stronger and with greenwashing, they want to prove to be good and increase the value of the company." -Focus group 1

There was a mutual agreement that greenwashing feels unethical and wrong as the participants assumed that by their purchase decisions, they were promoting a company that is advocating for justice for the environment. Now they realised they were transferring their funds to a company that does not complete these promised environmental actions. This behaviour increases the distrust towards all companies upholding similar values.

"I feel like they are really difficult to separate and how can I know that what they are saying is true, when it feels like everyone everywhere is promoting the same things" - Focus group 3

"Feels like all the time someone is trying to fool you and you have to stay on your toes all the time, especially when I am trying to buy good products and think about my decisions." -Focus group 3

The moderator explained how there are no laws against greenwashing. When asked about their thoughts on legislation when it comes to greenwashing and false advertising, one interviewee brought out an interesting viewpoint that could be implemented in the production and marketing of fashion.

"I see the fast fashion industry as the same as the cigarette industry was years ago. Meaning that companies are trying to cover how big the bad influences are and pretending that everything is well. The cigarette companies have not disappeared anywhere, but there have been a lot of restrictions and it is more and more expensive to smoke nowadays, which is why the consumption has decreased as well. All of this has happened because of laws." -Focus group 3

After the interviewees fully understood the meaning of greenwashing, they were able to bring out different perspectives of it and in the first interview, they considered companies taking advantage of the better brand image they could claim by making these green statements and winning over conscious consumers without helping the environment. Giving false statements about the greenness is too lucrative of a marketing scheme not to take part in. Companies using greenwashing as a profitable business tool was looked upon as a huge ruse deceiving the consumers and the environment. Companies' reluctance to change their behaviour is not going to change without proper restrictions on greenwashing and without the support from the consumers it is difficult to motivate companies that intentionally use greenwashing.

3.5. Discussion and recommendations

When collecting data from the interviews, there were limitations, which could have caused issues with the data collection, due to poor internet connection and the inability to interpret their physical behaviour as well as scheduling delays as online meetings are not as time constricting as physical meetings would have been. Due to the current global pandemic, online interviews were the only appropriate way to conduct the interviews. They are endowed with positive attributes as well, such as, creating a more comfortable environment in means of being able to answer more openly as the interviewees are in their chosen location.

The findings of the study unveiled a larger pattern that each of the participants appeared to follow when making purchase decisions. They all purchased clothing for a need and admitted that their behaviour had not always been that way, thus thorough studying and having an interest towards more responsible consumption has paved the way for avoiding the purchase of anything unless it is needed. Collectively, they described the distribution of their purchase choices as clothing that is timeless and not manipulated by trends and clothing that is merely seasonal, for instance, only worn in the summer months. The primary factors affecting their purchase decisions were comfort, exterior looks and pricing, whereas sustainability, environmental friendliness and the values of the company came as a secondary preference.

The findings also validated Ajzen's theory of planned behaviour, mentioned in section 1.1., as the interviewees had positive attitudes towards sustainability and negative thoughts towards greenwashing and at least tried to avoid unsustainable purchase choices. Furthermore, being environmentally friendly was considered fashionable, revealing that other people's opinions mattered to these interviewees. The interviewees believed their actions could make a difference and were motivated to continue educating themselves and improving their purchase decisions, however it is still difficult to detect greenwashing.

Based on the theories mentioned above in section 1.2. the moderator was able to detect the appearance of perceived consumer confusion, green trust and perceived green risk. Green trust appeared as the interviewees were not able to give out proper examples of brands that use greenwashing a marketing tool. Green risk was shown in the form of emotional guilt when making these poor decisions and being aware of them, which leads to the future appearance of perceived green risk, due to not knowing which products are actually sustainable.

Figure 4. Consumer's greenwashed purchase decision.

Source: Made by the author based on the findings of this research.

To conclude the findings of this research the author combined a visual conclusion on how a consumer ends up making a greenwashed purchase decision. A common agreement between the interviewees was that keeping discussion alive on the topic also helped keep them on track with thinking about their consumption choices and purchasing behaviour. Having more and more research and studies done on greenwashing is very important for raising awareness and for providing the correct information for the consumers to find. The target audience, young people, are easily bored but get on board with new trends and having more and more real information available will help bring awareness and keep it from fading from people's memories. The most common reason why they are not implementing the actions they said they valued is money.

As greenwashing is typically intentional in fast-fashion companies, the recommendations are targeted towards companies that are implementing honest green marketing and are taking actions towards a more sustainable and environmentally friendly future. Companies should implement more transparency in their advertising and their websites and attempt to explain terms that are used for describing their environmental actions and act as an educational platform for their customers. The responsibility is partially in the hands of the consumers as the more the target audience demands for more transparency and more actions towards environmentally friendly materials and manufacturing the more the industry is going to change. Nothing is going to change unless consumers begin to significantly promote transparent and truly sustainable products or if legal means step in, which would force the industry to re-design themselves.

There is a discrepancy between how consumers make their decisions and how marketers think the consumers are going to make the decisions, thus marketers should learn to implement these two different aspects and utilize these techniques that target different characteristics that influence consumers purchasing decisions, which are also mentioned in the section 1.1.

CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to further study the phenomenon labelled as greenwashing further and to find out more about the effects it has on the consumers' purchasing decisions in the fashion industry. The research was built around two research questions. The first chapter explained the theory of greenwashing and the outcomes of it in terms of consumer behaviour, including purchase decision making of sustainable products. These sections provided understanding of the environmental impacts of the phenomenon and gave tools to analyse the interviewees consumption behaviour in the third chapter of the thesis.

Focus group interviews were conducted to identify answers to the two research questions and the findings were analysed with a qualitative content analysis. The main finding was how aware the interviewees were of greenwashing and yet so unaware of being impacted by greenwashing. Overall, the greenwashing phenomenon as a term is well known among Finnish female consumers, though the knowledge on where and how to recognize the phenomenon is superficial. They lack the skills and general information provided by the firms to have the ability to have more thorough knowledge. In order to answer the second research question: "what role does greenwashing play in consumer's purchase decision making", it was crucial to find out how aware are the young Finnish consumers are of the negative impacts of greenwashing and being impacted by this phenomenon. For closing the first research question, whether the consumers are aware of being impacted by the greenwashing phenomenon, the most common response was not being impacted by greenwashing but interpreting their answers to other questions and giving them more examples of greenwashing without naming it as greenwashing, they realised how much they have actually been impacted by the phenomenon. Greenwashing does play an important role in consumers' decision of purchasing sustainable fashion, as all of the interviewees had purchased garments with the intention of being eco-friendly and trusting different brands' statements. This also proves that not all them are aware of the scope of greenwashing and green statements used in the industry as some of them had not comprehended that they have in fact been exposed to greenwashing until they were told specific examples. This led to the realisation that Greenwashing's role on

consumers' purchasing decisions is obscure to the consumers, but undeniably playing an influential role subconsciously.

The participants found the discussion pleasant, because they were all interested in the topic and acknowledged that having continuous reminders of how to keep doing better helps. After gaining more knowledge on the topic, young Finnish females were eager to learn better ways to avoid the phenomenon and some even wanted to stay past the interview to discuss. They lack the skills and general information provided by the firms to have the ability to have more thorough knowledge. Sustainability itself turned out to have a secondary role as their reasoning for purchasing eco-labelled clothing were selfish and sustainability's role was only mentioned when discussing the clothing lasting longer.

The author has formed recommendations for marketers and for consumers as it is important for marketers and for businesses to understand why and how consumers behave as they do. Companies should be more transparent in their advertising and create more understandable content about their environmental conduct on their websites and attempt to clarify the terms used to describe their environmental efforts and serve as a learning platform for their consumers. This thesis extended the previous knowledge on how consumers form their purchasing decisions of sustainable clothing when greenwashing is an impacting factor. This thesis also provides a good insight to the phenomenon and how consumers and marketers could learn from their past mistakes and behaviours. Further research suggestions would be a case study on the organisation point of view, which would bring additional depth to the topic as many researches are from the consumer perspective. Marketers can benefit from this research and the knowledge gained from this if they are promoting honest green products and how to present them the best possible way without being too overloading or confusing for the potential consumers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Coding & categorization of content analysis

Code	Category	Theme
recycling	Environmental values	**Awareness of sustainability and the environmental impact**
Guilt	Feeling guilty after non-environmental action	
responsibility	Trendy to be interested in the environment	
nature	Climate change as a motivational driver for better consumption	
organic	Making green choices	
trendiness	Difficult to find information	
green choice		
hidden information		
motivation		
climate change		
greenwashing		
A need	Consumer segments	**Consumer purchase-decision-making**
one-time-investment	Purchase decision	
impulse purchase	Making a purchase decision	
comfortable		
price-quality ratio		
personal consumption		

income		
long-lasting		
social support		
domestic		
learned behavior		
lack of interest		
online shopping		

Influencers	Influencer give out discounts	**Social media as a tool for marketing**
ads	Inspiration from influencers	
campaigns	Website browsing for boredom	
promotional codes	Fast fashion promotions on instagram	
frustration	Exposing fast fashion brands on social media	
website browsing	Influencers have too much power on social media	
boredom		
fast fashion		
inspiration		
social media		
Instagram		

power		
exposing		
Change	Change of the industry	**Greenwashing as a business tool**

Laws	taking advantage of consumers	
brand image	covering up the truth	
distrust		

Source: Compiled by the author from the transcribed data.

Appendix 2. Background of the interviewees

Participants	Country	Gender	Age	Sociological class	Date of interview
Person A	Finland	Female	23	Student	9.11.2021
Person B	Finland	Female	23	Student	9.11.2021
Person C	Finland	Female	22	Student	9.11.2021
Person D	Finland	Female	24	Student	9.11.2021
Person E	Finland	Female	21	Working	10.11.2021
Person F	Finland	Female	20	Student	10.11.2021
Person G	Finland	Female	21	Working	10.11.2021
Person H	Finland	Female	25	Working	10.11.2021
Person I	Finland	Female	23	Student	18.11.2021
Person J	Finland	Female	23	Working	18.11.2021
Person K	Finland	Female	23	Student	18.11.2021
Person L	Finland	Female	25	Student	18.11.2021

Source: Compiled by the author based on the information the interviewees gave.

Appendix 2. Interview plan

Theme 1	Warming phase for the interview	10min
1.	If I say "sustainability and environmental-friendliness" what comes to your mind first? What else? Any other thoughts? - Create a mind map	3 min
2.	Next, please share your opinions. How important are these factors you mentioned to you? What kind of actions do you take personally to comply with these values? Think about other young females in Finland – do they share the same values? What values?" - Draw a value map of different segments in the market (environmentally conscious, concerned, careless, etc)	7 min
Theme 2	How aware are young Finnish consumers of the negative environmental impacts of greenwashing in the fashion industry and being impacted by this behaviour?	15min
3.	Imagine that you are going clothing shopping online. What are you looking for? Describe your consumer journey – why are you shopping there? What motivates you? What happens next? How do you make your decision to purchase something?	
4.	What do you think – young females, like you, do they buy clothes a lot? What can drive them to shop often? Where do you get the idea to buy something, from a need, ad, etc?	
5.	What are the messages of ads targeted to young females? Do you like them?	
6.	We talked about green values before: Do you believe in the same green values when purchasing fashion? If you think about the fashion industry, does it have the same values?	
7.	Have you ever heard of the term "greenwashing"? What comes to your mind when thinking of this? If not, explain the meaning and ask how it could be harmful? Have you ever noticed greenwashing somewhere? Where?	
Theme 3	Does greenwashing play a role in consumers' purchase decision of sustainable fashion?	10min
9.	Show visual examples of green claims and ads: What do you see in this ad? How likely would you purchase based on this advertisement? Why?	
10.	Why does the fashion industry use such green statements? Can you find a good example? What green statements have you noticed? How does it make you feel?	
11.	As a consumer, how do you feel about everything we have discussed before? Do you think there is enough information about the clothing, e g. on websites and do you feel like you understand it? Should something be done differently or is it good as it is?	
Theme 4	Ending the interview	5min
11.	Would you say this interview gave you a new information about greenwashing and green claims and where to spot it happening?	
12.	Did this information change the way you feel about shopping fashion, and will it affect your future purchasing decisions? Why, why not?	

Source: Made by the author for this research.

Appendix 3. Interview transcripts

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1n3m7SRDkLQebcGrcxEiT8CPW3iQ0kVnIxV-shXZsmew/edit?usp=sharing

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